

Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind

5



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♣Me at Age Sixteen – Part 1

THREE months had passed since my sixteenth birthday. The thought that I'd been Tinaris for sixteen years now was an evocative one, for sure, but my days were sadly still much too busy and hectic for me to linger on it.

On this particular day, I decided to read through the materials I took from Grandma Elysis's workshop. I brought the papers and alchemical apothecary tomes to my room and arranged them neatly. They were all in-depth, fascinating sources of knowledge. My grandmother really was an incredible woman. The scribbles she included between the lines were valuable hints, too.

I took out my own apothecary notebook and jotted down recipes for medicine that were similar to the ones I was used to producing.

Being able to learn new things like this is such a joy!

"Hm?"

As I flipped through the pages, I stiffened upon finding a very eye-catching potion name: "Love Potion."

L-L-L-L-Love potion?! F-For real?!

I couldn't mask my confusion. Medicines in this world were, indeed, unlike the ones from my past life and had effects that were basically magical. So, a love potion was...well...not entirely unthinkable.

I looked at its ingredients, my heart racing.

♣A love droplet produced from Duana flower petals, Lilith flower petals, Solan flower petals, Celestial flower petals, etc.

♣A maiden's tears

♣Drum herbs

♣Morning dew, Calystegia seeds, evening mist

"Whoa... That's a pretty demanding potion."

By gathering as many flower petals as possible and repeatedly condensing and stirring them, one could produce what's called a love droplet. The explanation made it seem easy, but the number of

flower petals required for it was daunting. By stirring and condensing them, one could produce one droplet that was highly concentrated. Doing that took more than just plain old patience.

A maiden's tears...weren't hard to get. I'd just need to eat something really bitter and shed some tears. However, freshness was key. The tears wouldn't be of any use if I didn't get the other ingredients, the love droplet included, first.

Based on its name, I assumed drum herbs would be growing somewhere in the area around here...but as it turned out, I was way off. Apparently, these were gigantic leaves that only grew in a cliff cave on the eastern coast of the Mythical continent called the Renne Fountain. The leaves were over fifteen feet large, making them extremely difficult to both extract and transport.

Morning dew meant literal morning dew, the kind that dripped from medicinal herbs. How easy it was to find depended on the weather.

Calystegia were flowers that were of similar species to morning glories. These also seemed easy to find at first glance, but they only bloomed in the northern parts of the demi-human continent, making them expensive to obtain. But in terms of difficulty, it actually wasn't high compared to the other things on this list; all I needed was money and time.

Lastly, there was the evening mist. This, too, depended on the weather, and it being mist made it difficult to collect. Plastic bags didn't exist in this world, so I'd probably need to use a bottle to collect the mist.

I wouldn't even know how to use bottled mist. Do I pour all the other ingredients into the pot, mix it, then sprinkle in the mist? How do you even sprinkle mist on something? Is it physically possible? I pondered.

"Grandma's recipes really are advanced..."

The idea of making this love potion and having Renge drink it was one that enticed me a little...really, only just a little.

Wh-What am I thinking?! Influencing people's feelings with potions is wrong. It's out of the question! I am not making a love potion! I'll just keep it in mind in case someone needs help with something like this and there's nothing else I can do to help them.

That said, Grandma's recipe book really was a fascinating, eye-opening read. There were so many recipes that felt out of my league, but that only made me want to tackle them all the more.

Hm... Is there a medicine that looks challenging but doable for me?

A medicine for ingrown toenails. Medicine for treating bunions. Medicine for helping with bed wetting. A cream for dealing with burn marks. Medicine to help with infants crying at night.

Oh, medicine that can move fat inside the body?! That's great! I could move excess fat from my stomach and thighs to my chest... Hehehe...

“Oh? There’s even medicine to make animals speak?”

That’s cool! I could have Mujimuji drink it. That way, we can finally figure out what he is!

I still had no idea what Mujimuji was. Nakona told me Mujimuji became gigantic once, but apparently, she only heard about it from the twins. That second-hand account didn’t really help me understand what Mujimuji was. René and Moné said Mujimuji got really big and flew through the sky, which was really baffling to imagine.

But apparently, René and Moné were in serious danger at the time. If Mujimuji could talk, maybe it would be able to keep them out of trouble and alert them to danger.

“All right, let’s try to make this potion!” I decided.

It looked difficult, but I wanted to challenge myself to gauge what I was capable of. First, for the ingredients...

- ♣ Animal dung
- ♣ A Mythical Beast’s tail tuft
- ♣ Iragad red pepper seeds
- ♣ Eve flower petal essence
- ♣ Lizardmen scales
- ♣ Powdered skull

“Ugh...” I groaned.

What’s with these ingredients?!

I could understand using animal dung, since you’d need something from the animal you would be using it on. A Mythical Beast’s tail tuft I could manage, too. Iragard red pepper seeds weren’t an issue either, since they were normally sold in the market... But the seeds it was referring to are the spiciest ones that are deep inside the pepper. I recalled it being used to make death sauce...

And it’s using that deadly pepper as an ingredient for medicine an

animal is supposed to consume? I-Is that even safe to drink? Maybe the medicine's other ingredients will break down the spiciness?

I was worried about that part, so I figured I'd taste it a little first. I wasn't fond of spicy food, but I rather experiment on myself before feeding it to Mujimuji.

Eve flowers only bloomed on the Mythical continent, but I had a few samples of them in potted plants I got from Grandma, so I was good on that front.

For lizardmen scales...maybe I can ask Dad?

Lizardmen were a type of demi-human. They were stubborn and daring, but very pious and devoted to their comrades. By pious, I mean they're devoted to the Holy Woman. And since I'm the Holy Woman of the current age, I was a bit scared of interacting with them... But if I asked Dad, surely he could get me a lizardman's scales.

Which left the last ingredient—powdered skull. Apparently, the skull of any creature capable of speech would work, but the book did recommend human or raven skulls.

Uuuuugh...

I was shocked the book would recommend something like that. But more than that, I was shocked ravens were in the same category as humans... And not only was it baffling in theory, but the thought of handling a raven's skull was pretty icky too!

...Aww man, what am I going to do? Just looking at the ingredient list is making my heart sink! I want to make it, but having to mess with skulls is a little too much for me. Isn't there a substitute that could do?

"Huh?" I blinked as I scanned the page again. "A wise dragon's scale?"

Grandma wrote down a note that a single white wise dragon's scale could be used as a substitute for the lizardman scale and the skull.

Well, that's convenient! But a white dragon is a Mythical, right? Maybe Renge can steer me in the right direction.

"Oh, gosh, look at the time." I checked my pocket watch, seeing it was time for dinner.

I was so focused on reading that the time flew by. Grandma's alchemical apothecary books were all too interesting!



“OH, Holy Woman, you’re laaaate,” Mirage greeted me as I entered the second floor’s dining hall.

“We already got started, hm,” Jiril said.

“Pardon my tardiness. So, what are we making today?” I asked.

Apparently, they were making Repopon bean soup. Repopon beans were often raised in dry areas. They were highly nutritious and used in all sorts of dishes. They absorbed fluids easily, making them great for soup.

They had also prepared salad and freshly baked bread. We’d recently obtained a large number of Rucks from the monsters I had purified, so we were able to use their milk for cream cheese.

I wish I could eat some Japanese cooking, though...

Western cooking was fine, of course, but I couldn’t help but long for miso soup and soy sauce. There was a type of bean I could use to make something similar to soy sauce and miso soup, but it wasn’t easy to produce in bulk. We had limited space inside Fort Deshmel’s walls, which was an issue too, but more than anything, I needed a lot of beans to make enough soy sauce.

I sighed. I couldn’t help but miss the days when I could just freely experiment without a care in the world.

“My, that was a deep sigh, hm,” Jiril said, noticing my sigh.

“Longing for soy sauce agaaaaain?” Mirage asked.

“Yeah! What I wouldn’t give for some soy sauce and sashimi...” I said longingly.

But that was a luxury in my current position. Getting fresh fish in Deshmel, which was situated at the heart of the continent, was pretty much impossible. Back when I lived in Rofola, Lake Rhode was practically right outside the inn, so fresh fish were always a hook and a line away.

Oooh, even just some fried fish sounds like a delicacy right now...

“Hmmm. Then how about this, Holy Woman, hm?” Jiril proposed. “Why don’t you take fish from Rofola and make them into fish sauce?”

“Fish sauce...? What does that consist of?” I asked, unsure of if it had similarities to the fish sauce from my past life.

The two Mythical women exchanged surprised expressions. Was it really that surprising that I didn’t know exactly what they meant?

“You see, fish sauce is a seasoning you make by placing a fish

in a bottle. You put in about a fourth of its mass in salt, hm. You then place it somewhere warm, but without exposing it to the sun, to ferment for a year or so,” Jiril explained.

“The soy sauce you made from the beaaaaans tasted kind of like fish sauce, so I was suuuuuure you knew of it,” Mirage said.

“Oh?” I asked in surprise. “It tasted similar?”

“Yes. Maybe we should order some, hm? Although it might not pair well with food from the human continent, hm,” Jiril noted.

I-I can't believe it! There's actually a seasoning that's like soy sauce in this world?! And it's made from fish! I wanna try it!

“Can you teach me how to make it?!” I leaned in close to the Mythical women.

“Ooooh. You want to maaaaake it?” Mirage asked.

“Yes! I do!”

I hurried over to the kitchen, picked up the notepad I had there, and jotted down the recipe they mentioned. Apparently, any fish would do, and since you ferment it, you keep the fish's internal organs in. The salt should be a fourth of the fish's size.

Once that's done, you close the lid on the bottle or jar and put a note with the date you prepared the fish on it. You then place it somewhere warm, where the sun doesn't reach it, for over a year—two, if possible—to ferment.

After a year, the decay should leave the internal organs, and fermentation begins, at which point it becomes sloshy. You filter it carefully, removing any impurities. After a year, the fish's bones dissolve as well, leaving only strained lees.

Apparently, once the internal organs completely dissolve, it produces a taste that's more bitter than the kind of soy sauce I make from beans. But the savory flavor of the fish becomes much stronger, forming a flavor that should be ideal.

“I'll make it!” I declared, my notepad in hand.

Any Japanese person should love this seasoning!

I decided to get fish from Lake Rhiole.

Still, a year to ferment it, huh...?

When fermenting beans, I mixed in kōji mold and salt, and transmuted them using alchemy. The kōji mold I made from Rairai, a rice-like grain. I was excited about Rairai at first, thinking it might be like white rice, but that wasn't the case.

Rairai was made in sticky marshes occupied by Gekkods, a race of bipedal frog people. They were about half as tall as a

human, and since I was no good with frogs, they scared me a little. Just hearing about them gave me chills... I felt bad for the frog people, but I was just creeped out by them.

So, I decided to look for some other source of something like white rice. That said, using Rairai for mold was the right choice. With this, I was able to establish a recipe for soy sauce. Still, I ended up having to look for another substitute for it, anyway.

I didn't expect it to be easy, but replicating my old world's food in this world was difficult. Even western cooking didn't always end up working out. Sausages and wieners were especially hard; they ended up feeling much rawer than the ones I had in my past life. I'd gotten used to this by now, but it was especially troubling when I made pot-au-feu.

In that regard, fish being essentially the same as they were in my past life meant I could cook them the way I was familiar with, and their flavor was guaranteed. That left milk, but we only had goat milk, which had a very distinct flavor. I'd gotten used to that by now, too.

That's why I was shocked the first time I had Ruck milk. It didn't smell bad at all, and it was slightly sweet. It was very close to the cow milk from my world. Drinking it didn't give me a stomachache, and it proved very useful for making sweets.

But while I was able to improve my repertoire of dishes, I wasn't where I wanted to be quite yet. I wanted to gather ingredients from all the continents and try things out! Medicine and ingredients were important, but I wanted to make more dishes!

But forget that right now! Fish sauce! Focus on the fish sauce!

"Hmm, if I used mold to make enzymes, would it allow me to make fish sauce faster?" I wondered aloud.

"You want to make fish sauce with alchemy, hm? You really can make anything with alchemy, can't you, Holy Woman?" Jiril said.

"I-I mean, I want to try it right now!" I exclaimed.

"Then why don't you aaaaaask Eure to buy you some of the fish sauce on saaaaaale in the Mythical continent?" Mirage suggested.

Huh? Wait, I can do that?!

"They sell fish sauce?!" I asked.

"Yes, it's commonly soooooold."

"Wow! Then yes, let's do that!"

I still wanted to try making it myself, though. *After all, I haven't tasted Rofola's fish in a long time. But letting it ferment for a year, huh? The warehouse I have in the medicinal herb garden should do for that job.* For the time being, I added fish sauce to Eure's shopping list.

"Ah, erm..." I hummed loudly.

"What's troubling you noooooow?" Mirage asked.

"No, it's just...I was looking through my grandma's alchemy books, materials, and recipes earlier, so I was just thinking that maybe I could try making things other than healing salves. They're pretty complicated recipes, though... They're all really interesting, but considering how difficult it will be to gather all the ingredients makes me think twice about trying them."

This was the hard part about being an alchemical apothecary; I was effectively a one-woman-business. If I was a state alchemical apothecary like Grandma, I'd be able to use the national treasury to get a variety of ingredients. That was one advantage to working for a country—you'd get a very powerful state sponsor.

"I see. So, you're trying to come uuuuup with recipes you can make with ingredients froooooom the Mythical continent so you can have Eure get you the ingredieeeeeents?" Mirage asked.

"...Haha, yeah..."

Is Mirage a mind reader or something? Is she reading my thoughts?

"Hm, then how about *that*?" Jiril suggested with a suggestive smile.

"Ooh, *thaaaaaat*," Mirage nodded sagely.

"Wh-What are you talking about?" I asked cautiously.

Did I ask the wrong people for advice?

"A truth potion," they said at once.

"No! Just from the name, I can tell it's a bad idea! No!" I promptly discarded that idea.

"But why noooooot?" Mirage asked. "That way, you'll be able to confeeeeeeess your feelings more easily?" Her lips curled into an even bigger smile.

"I don't need help with that!" I denied it with every fiber of my being.

"Stop right there!" a voice suddenly boomed through the room.

"Whoa!" I jolted.

Nakona hurried into the dining hall. She was carrying a

wooden crate in her arms—she probably came to deliver the herbs I grew in Rofola.

“Tina, that’s an excellent idea!” she said, drawing closer to me.

“Wh-What’s an excellent idea? What are you on about?” I asked, stressed by how desperate she looked.

She placed the wooden crate on a table and grabbed me by the shoulder. “That’s what that doofus Shida needs to be able to talk honestly with Sirius! Make that potion! Now!”

“Huuuuh?!” I was stunned by her request.

Having recently gotten engaged to Shida, Nakona was worried about his relationship with his father. She had them go on drinking bouts to get closer. But sadly, both of them—like father, like son—became argumentative when inebriated, and their drinking bouts always ended in heated arguments.

...I could imagine the two of them bickering over drinks. They were both logical to a fault in their way of thinking.

“They’re both pigheaded! And they’re both good drinkers, too, so they don’t get drunk!” Nakona complained.

“Maybe you should get theeeeeem stronger drinks?” Mirage suggested.

“Mm, well, apparently elves are pretty weak to alcohol, but those two are especially strong drinkers. Maybe it’s because they’ve got human blood in their veins?” Nakona guessed.

They probably acted so sourly because they only got partially drunk. And so, Nakona stepped in to help them. Those two probably really wanted to reconcile, after all.

Even so, she was racking her brain over how to make their fourth father-son drinking bout go smoothly like hers and Dad’s, but their elven pride was getting in the way.

“Hm, then I recommend Mushumushu viper ale,” Jiril said, adorably sticking out her tongue like a snake.

“What’s that?! Just the name sounds dangerous!” Nakona looked mortified.

“Is that safe to drink...?” I asked.

For how cute she acted, the name really did sound lethal...

Mushumushu was a type of Mythical beast that excreted deadly venom. Apparently, their fangs could be used to harvest especially lethal venom with strong numbing effects. Even a single drop had to be diluted to one-thousandth of its potency to produce an anesthetic. But that wasn’t the issue here.

Mushumushu viper ale was made by cutting off a Mushumushu's viper-like tail and submerging it in strong Apoapo (an apple-like fruit) brandy for six months. It was considered the Mythical continent's strongest and most terrible alcohol, with 98% alcohol content. Just one sip made you a tipsy mess that slurred your words. Two were enough to knock anyone out. Even the strongest drinkers in the Mythical continent never dared drink it unless they were in a hardcore drinking contest.

So yes, it was a truly terrible drink!

"W-Will a half-elf really be all right drinking that...?!" Nakona asked.

"I'm sure a sip won't kill them," Jiril said.

"Indeed. And you might as well get them reaaaaaaally drunk," Mirage nodded. "You can have Mushumushu viper ale as your trump caaaaard when you try to get them druuuuunk. After all, maybe what they're drinking isn't haaaaard enough."

"Not hard enough?! W-Well, I guess you might be right..." Nakona turned pensive. She looked like she actually believed them.

Are you sure you should be listening to them, Nakona?!

"Just mix one droooooop of Mushumushu viper ale into the barrel. It could make all the diiiifference!" Mirage pressed.

"Yes, I think you should try that first, hm!" Jiril insisted.

At this point, everything Jiril and Mirage said sounded like the devil whispering in Nakona's ears.

"So, uh, how would I go about getting this Mushumushu viper ale?" Nakona asked.

"If you ask Eure or Shinsen, they should be able to get you a bottle, hm," Jiril replied.

"And what about the truth potion?" Nakona returned to that topic again.

"Wait, Nakona, you're still going to use the truth potion?!" I asked.

"Of course, I am!" Nakona placed her hands on her hips. "The only reason you think using one on them isn't a good idea is because you haven't seen how contrarian those two can be!"

"Huuuuh...?"

I could only guess at how bad those two must have been acting to make Nakona resort to this. The way she put it, it was worse than what I could possibly imagine. But still, getting them drunk was one thing, but resorting to a truth potion to get them to be honest felt

wrong to me. It wasn't like our objective here was to drive a wedge between them, and I wasn't sure it was right to have them drink this potion without their consent.

Would they even agree to drink a truth potion if we asked? And drugging people wasn't something I could condone as a doctor of sorts.

"But to begin with, I don't have a recipe for a truth potion—" I said, hoping to get out of it.

"Oh? Did your grandmother's recipe book not have one, hm?" Jiril asked.

"I hear they're uuuuuuused in trials in the human world," Mirage appended.

"Seriously?!"

I hurried back to my room and checked Grandma's books again. And sure enough, the recipe was there!

"A truth potion is used in criminal investigations and for testimonies in trials," it said. "Its use is also recommended for acquitting partners suspected of adultery and when signing contracts for money loaning."

W-Wow! It's used in fairly common situations!

I returned to the dining hall with the recipe book. I showed Nakona the recipe, to which she whispered gloomily, "Then why didn't Dad use it on Mom?!" I decided to leave that topic at that; it struck me as too convoluted to even contemplate.

"So, can you make it?" Nakona asked.

"Hm, give me a second. Its difficulty is advanced. The ingredients are Pam leaves, meat patty gravy, Brokensteel ivy, wild berry fruit, talking mushroom, poteto juice, cross mushroom, life powder, Mythical tail tuft, Deshmel scorpion tail venom, Fei Lu shells, powdered red toadstool, Eve flower leaves... Why does it need so many ingredients?!" I cried once I got to the end of the list.

This might be the largest recipe I've seen yet!

"Huh, is the recipe really that complicated?" Nakona asked. "I mean, usually your medicine just needs three or four ingredients."

"Y-Yeah. I can see why it's called an advanced recipe, if only because of how many ingredients it needs," I said.

Yeah, just the size of the recipe made it challenging. It did say it could be made with just Pam leaves, Brokensteel ivy, wild berry fruit, talking mushroom, poteto essence, cross mushroom, life powder, and Mythical tail tuft. The other ingredients were simply

discovered through research to make it easier to drink and boost the effect.

That was just proof of how widely this potion was used on the human continent. It's being researched even now. I was honestly impressed.

I did want to challenge myself with more difficult concoctions, so making this might be just what I wanted.

"Also, why does it have so many toxins in it?! It's not lethal, is it?" Nakona asked suspiciously.

"I-I think mixing the toxins together cancels out the poisonous effect," I explained. "There's lots of other medicine like that."

By mixing two powerful toxins together, they can cancel out each other's toxicity. The best examples in this world were Bufug fish (this world's version of the Fugu) poison and wolfsbane poison. That said, while they cancel each other out, that doesn't mean they need to be mixed in equal amounts. It was still dangerous to work with toxins, and the best option was always not to ingest something toxic at all if possible.

In terms of this potion's ingredients, the poisonous mushroom could have its toxin broken down with the Pam leaves and life powder. Lilith leaves are typically used for antitoxins, but there were many other plants that could purify poisons. Pam leaves are famous for being second to Lilith leaves in terms of being an anti-venom.

Indeed, upon closer inspection, all the ingredients seemed to synergize together like that. This was proof that the recipe was developed over many years and that this potion was used often. Thinking about it like that, the truth potion didn't look so bad anymore.

"But, hm, gathering all these ingredients does seem like a challenge," Jiril said, concerned.

"Yeees. Do you always make potions with this many ingredients? I hold you in much higher regaaaard now," Mirage nodded.

"What do you mean by that?"

So you were holding me in low regard until now? I had to wonder.

I decided not to dwell on that—it would just depress me. More importantly, I lacked ingredients for the truth potion. Pam leaves grew in the demi-human continent's wetlands. Meat patty sauce... well, I was impressed someone came up with using it as an

alchemical ingredient.

That's genius, actually! I guess they added it to improve the taste, but still!

Brokensteel ivy grew in the demi-human continent's mines. Wild berry fruits were easily found across the human continent, so those weren't an issue. Talking mushrooms grew in the demi-human continent's forests.

For poteto juice, apparently any poteto would work. This was likely just for flavor, too. Cross mushrooms grew in the Mythical continent. Life powder was made by repeatedly condensing mana in a living being's internal organs. A Mythical beast's tail tuft was naturally harvested from a Mythical's tail, which, thankfully I had access to.

Deshmel scorpion tail venom could be found in the area. I already asked Revireus to gather scorpions for alchemy use. I certainly wasn't going to pick up scorpions myself!

Fei Lu shells were gathered on the coasts of the waterside country of Fei Lu. I could buy them from Mister Giyaga. As for Powdered red toadstool... Red toadstools were highly toxic mushrooms that grew in the human continent's forests. Apparently just touching them gave you a rash, so they had to be handled with care. I wanted to stock up on those anyway, since they were useful for all sorts of medicine.

And Eve flower leaves I could gather from my personal herb garden. That's all the ingredients!

"Just gathering the ingredients is going to take a while..." I whispered after thinking it over.

"That's fine, I understand," Nakona smiled. "I'll go gather all those ingredients for you, then."

"Huh?! But some of those are hard to find! They're on other continents!" I pointed out.

"Just give me two weeks! I'll get Shinsen and Eure to help me get everything for you! But, uh...you can get the poteto juice and meat patty sauce on your own, right?"

"W-Well, yeah, of course— Ah, Nakona, wait!" I called after her before she could dart out of the dining hall.

She's serious about gathering all those ingredients!

Maybe I wasn't taking Nakona's feelings for Shida seriously enough. I didn't think she'd actually go as far as collecting all those ingredients just to help Shida and Sirius make up...

That said, if she was headed back to Rofola, there was something I needed to ask her.

“Nakona, could you get me a ton of fish from Lake Rhio? No need to cut them up or anything, just bring them as they are,” I requested.

“Huh? Why?” she asked.

“I want to make fish sauce,” I replied.

“Fish sauce...? What’s that? Some new medicine?”

“No, it’s a seasoning.”

“O-Oh. Yeah, makes sense you’d want to do that. Okay, got it. I’ll bring them over next time.”

“Thanks! I’m counting on you!”



AND so, with Nakona, Shinsen, and Eure as my indentured serv—ahem, well-compensated labor force, I was able to gather the ingredients and work on them in the dining hall.

I can’t believe Nakona really did gather everything in two weeks.

As such, I felt obligated to hold up my side of the deal. I cooked meat patties that morning, presented them to Shinsen and Eure as thanks for helping me gather the ingredients, and then I stored the sauce for the truth potion.

Shinsen and Eure were absolutely delighted by their reward. And of course they were; the patties were made of 100 percent fresh Ruck meat. They were juicy, savory, and highly nutritious. They were very high-quality, and given how tasty they were, that was a given.

I stored the sauce in a bottle and placed it on my alchemy shelf.

“By the way, what about the Mushumushu viper ale?” I asked.

“Eure got it for me!” Nakona held up the bottle, grinning.

An ominous, reddish-purple fluid that gave off a really intimidating impression swirled inside the glass.

And is that a...s-s-snake inside the bottle?! I covered my mouth with my hands.

I knew they put vipers in snake shochu back in Japan, but I didn’t expect to see anything like it in this world.

“Hm, by the way, Nakona, I looked into viper ale after hearing

about this, but... Snake venom is divided into hemotoxic, neurotoxic, and cytotoxic classifications, right?" I said, reciting what I had learned.

"Huh? Yeah?" Nakona cocked her head at me.

"Apparently sea snakes have neurotoxins, so you can't use them for ale, but hemotoxic venom is safe so long as it doesn't penetrate the skin and blood vessels or if it's mixed in alcohol," I explained. "The alcohol helps the venom to dissolve and become nonpoisonous. Also, apparently mixing it with alcohol makes blood circulation better and is something of a panacea. Though that might not always be the case..."

"Wow, so there's an actual reason for using snakes like that, huh?" Nakona hummed, surprised by this finding.

The idea of viper ale being a panacea seemed absurd—I couldn't imagine it being as powerful as a supreme panacea. However, as I looked into it further, I learned viper ale was apparently good for growing hair, reinforcing the body's immune system, increasing vitality, and recovering stamina. And combating hair loss is one thing the supreme panacea isn't good for! So, as it turns out, the medicinal effects of snake venom are nothing to scoff at.

That said, there weren't any records regarding Mushumushu viper ale on the human continent. Since Mushumushu viper venom was a paralyzing agent, I had to ask myself if it wasn't actually a neurotoxin that wasn't safe to drink.

"But I haven't really been able to look into Mushumushu viper ale, so I'm not sure if this ale in particular is safe to drink," I noted.

And with how gnarly it looked, I doubted it was. I turned to look at Jiril and Mirage in the kitchen to confirm it with them. But just then, Renge walked into the dining hall and chimed in. "It's perfectly safe to drink," he said, entering our conversation.

"Wh-Whoa!" I exclaimed.

When did he get here?! Don't just pop out of nowhere like that!

"Hi, Renge," I greeted him. "Is it safe to drink even though Mushumushu have a paralyzing neurotoxin?"

"Yes, their paralyzing venom is quite powerful, but their tails are mixed in with honey to make it a mead," Renge explained. "It's probably done out of taste, because Mushumushu tend to favor honey. But when you dip it in mead, it produces Air that breaks down the neurotoxin. And since it contains Air, it probably also

functions as a mana restorative for magic users, too.”

“Really?!” I exclaimed.

That’s impressive! But...

“Is its alcohol percentage really high?” I asked.

“It probably is. It includes Air, so the alcohol ferments very quickly. You probably shouldn’t try drinking it, Tina,” he cautioned me.

“I wasn’t going to...” I shuddered.

Did he say I shouldn’t drink it because I’m a Spherit Folk? I guess it having mana restorative properties makes it more intoxicating for me. But wait, no, if it’s 99% alcohol, I don’t think any race can drink it without getting dead drunk.

“Humans shouldn’t drink this either, all right, Nakona?” Renge warned her. “Even Mythicals, who like this strong liquor, can’t walk straight after drinking it.”

“It’s not for me, it’s for Shida and Sirius,” Nakona told him.

“The current Elf of the Sun and Sirius? Why?” Renge looked utterly baffled.

It made sense he wouldn’t understand without context, so I calmly explained Nakona’s reasoning.

“But elves are weak to alcohol, unlike dwarves. Are you sure you want them to drink this?” he asked.

Renge questioning it, too, isn’t encouraging!

“They’ll just be mixing one droooooop into the wine barrel,” Mirage explained, pouring herself a mug’s worth from Nakona’s bottle.

“That’s right, hm. We’re not telling you to have them guzzle the bottle, hm,” Jiril nodded, pouring herself a mug’s worth too.

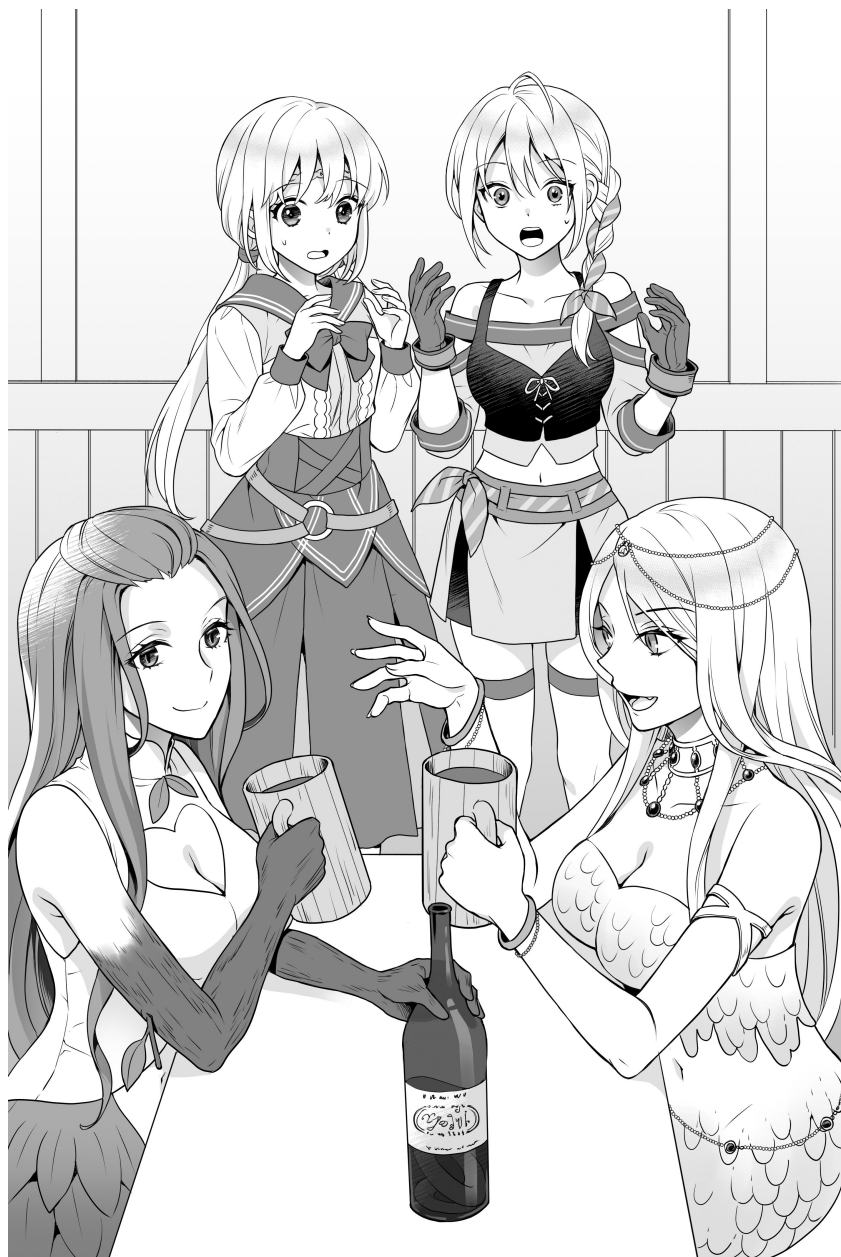
“Yeah, but you are!” Nakona and I exclaimed.

“W-Wait, isn’t that ale really strong?!” I asked.

“Neurotoxins don’t woook on dryads like meeeee,” Mirage said.

“Likewise, hm,” Jiril said. “I am a lamia, after all, so I’m immune to all venoms. Us snakes are heavy drinkers—we don’t get drunk no matter how much we drink. Mushumushu viper ale is like a bitter sweet to us.”

“Seriously...?” Nakona and I both stared in disbelief as the two Mythical ladies clinked their cups together.



They quickly finished most of the bottle, but were still unsatisfied and complained that I should have gotten Eure to buy four or five more bottles. I was actually worried that getting one whole bottle would be too much, and assumed I'd keep what was left for alchemy, but I guess I had nothing to worry about on that front...

If anything, the problem was that Nakona might not have enough for her plan now.

"Geez... I can't believe you drank so much of it!" she chided them.

"We're sowwy!" Jiril and Mirage apologized.

"Being cute about it won't help you!"

"Come on, Nakona, we were afraid of spiking their drinks with this thing anyway," I told her.

"I mean, yeah, but still!"

"I think that mixing even a drop into the barrel should make the alcohol percentage spike up and make it much more intoxicating," Renge commented after peering into the mostly empty bottle.

Nakona and I exchanged looks. This ale really was scary. Simply too intense.

"If it'll just make them tipsy, I guess it's fine..." Nakona said.

"Are you sure...?" I asked, mortified.

Nakona was really gung-ho about this.

"But just so we're extra sure, I'll be counting on your truth potion, Tina," she said.

"Y-Yeah, all right. I'll go make it, then."

"Sure! Good luck!"

I did have all the ingredients for it, and this was a difficult potion to make. I couldn't help but get excited.

"Are you taking these ingredients back to your room? I'll help you," Renge offered.

"Th-Thanks, Renge."

"Do you mind if I watch you make it?" he asked.

"Y-Yes, not this time, please. I'm making this potion for the first time, so I need to focus. Sorry," I apologized.

"I see. Don't worry about it. Just call me if you need help."

"I will. Thank you."

Renge helped me carry the ingredients to my room on the

second floor.

I like the way he's kind like this. It's sweet. But that's exactly why I don't want him to watch me work on a potion for the first time. I mean, he makes my heart throb like crazy!

When I'm aware my crush is looking at me, I could tense up, which makes my hands slip. If this was a potion I was used to making, I wouldn't mind, but that wasn't the case this time.

"All right, time to get started!" I said, pumping myself up for the work ahead.

I locked the door behind me and set my alchemical pot and ladle on my worktable. There were a lot of ingredients to work with and lots of steps to keep in mind. I opened Grandma's recipe book and confirmed the instructions.

"First up is the flavor. I need to mix the patty sauce and potato juice together. No mana is required, so I can conserve it at this phase. Got it," I hummed to myself.

I put the sauce and juice into a beaker and mixed them together with a wooden ladle, taking care not to mix in any mana.

And that's done. Quickly, too.

"Next, you mix the Pam leaves, wild berries, cross mushrooms, and Eve leaves together until they liquefy. This should form a powerful antitoxin. Add in plenty of mana. This should neutralize the Deshmel scorpion's venom and red toadstool's toxicity and increase its neutralizing effects, so not adding enough mana can be very dangerous," I read aloud and nodded. "I see."

So the idea isn't to just bring out the neutralizing effect, it's to increase the neutralizing effect to ensure the venom is fully gone.

To liquify the concoction, a ladle wouldn't do. Instead, I'd need to use the giant spoon I brought from Grandma's workshop. I hardly got a chance to use it, but now it was finally its time to shine.

I went about liquifying the ingredients. Grandma's alchemy tools were mostly custom-made, constructed from materials that conducted mana easily. I put the ingredients in the pot and began stirring them, using the spoon to crush them along the way. As I did, I poured in plenty of mana. The mana would ensure the concoction took the desired form, so I didn't hold back.

Keep at it! I told myself.

"Phew... This is hard."

I ended up using more mana than expected, but the concoction

seemed to liquefy well. I put the end result in a beaker.

Now, next up is...

“Crush the Fei Lu shell and the Brokensteel ivy into powder. This is important for drawing out hidden truths, so if possible, multiple people should be pouring in mana during this stage for a long time.” I paused there to process that part, then said, “I see, so it needs a lot of mana...”

I did have some of my mana restoratives prepared. This potion really was challenging. What was the point of a truth potion if its ability to draw out hidden truths wasn’t good enough, after all? If this attempt at it didn’t work out, I’d have to do it all over again.

I replenished my mana with a mana restorative.

Okay, let’s go! I’ll do it all on my own! Watch me, Grandma!

“Mortar! Ingredients! Pestle! Let’s go!”

Grind, grind, grind, grind...

“Ugh... They’re hard...!”

I crushed the ingredients with the pestle while infusing them with mana, but it wasn’t turning into powder. Maybe I just wasn’t pressing on it hard enough, or maybe I needed more mana to speed up the process.

Fei Lu shells were as large as clams, so I was prepared for it to be a bit hard, but the Brokensteel ivy was so hard it was hard to believe it was a plant! I understood why the recipe said several people had to spend days on this phase.

But looking at it made me not want to give up! I was a Spherit Folk, after all!

I’ll show you what I’m capable of!

I raised the speed of my mana recovery and increased the amount of mana I put in.

“Okay, let’s crush this stuff!”

The mana was seeping in well, and I could feel the Brokensteel ivy break into powder. I gulped down a mana restorative, poured in more mana, and continued crushing the ingredients. And around the time the two became a thin powder, I heard a knock on my door.

“My apologies for interrupting while you’re working, Holy Woman,” I heard a voice call out to me through the door. “What will you have for dinner? Should I bring it to your room?”

“H-Huh?”

Dinner? Did they just say dinner? But I started working on this

right after breakfast...

I had no idea how it was time for dinner already. I hurriedly checked my pocket watch, and it was past 7 in the evening.

Really?! It's way too late for lunch...!

My stomach growled in protest, as if prompted by me checking the watch.

"...I'll come out for dinner in a minute," I said.

"Understood. Today's dinner is Kapoperipe."

"Eep..." a small cry escaped me.

Kapoperipe was a traditional dish here in the Deshmel region, made from Deshmel scorpions. It was made by boiling hundreds of Deshmel scorpions until their shells could be peeled off, after which they were moistened with flour and water and cooked in the bottom of a large pot with spices.

The scorpions' meat would also be cut into pieces, sprinkled with hard liquor, and decorated with herbs. The scorpion tails would then be baked in the oven. Once fully baked, eggs would be cracked over the dish, which would then be cut up and served.

It was something of a Russian roulette sort of dish, since amateurs didn't know where the poisonous scorpion tails were. Or so I've heard, but I don't really know if that's true. I've avoided this dish so far by cooking my own meals, but...if it's ready, I'd just have to brave the challenge and eat it.

It seemed most of Deshmel's regional dishes included some sort of venom in them. Like the Cobrabara, a dish where they cut up the head of the venomous Deshmel cobra snake, roast it, and then peel the skin off its body to eat it. They also put Deshmel scorpions and cobras on a skewer and eat them that way, or wrap them in dough and bake them that way. And apparently some of the snakes don't die and end up hissing at people trying to eat them.

I'm pretty sure I'd cry if that happened to me.

I did understand that people living here had to make do with the regional wildlife and come up with ways to eat scorpions and snakes. It was their history and culture, and these regional dishes were the culmination of that. But I couldn't help but dread the possibility of being out of luck and getting poisoned...or attacked by my food...

I was Japanese in my past life, so I couldn't quite understand why foreigners seemed to fear sashimi, raw egg on rice, and natto,

but it was probably close to how I felt about Deshmel cuisine.

Still, fresh raw eggs on rice are so good... I definitely want to try that again if the fish sauce comes out well. Not that I've got the rice for it, though. Ugh...

I longed for the sweet taste of plain rice with a thick egg on it. If I could add the saltiness of soy sauce, the taste would surely be blissful. I really wished I could find something like rice...

And with that emotion in my heart, I had to try Kapoperipe. I couldn't fault the dish itself, but between the threat of poison and my memories of raw egg on rice, I really didn't feel motivated to try it.

But enough of that for today. Tomorrow morning I'll make myself some Japanese-style pasta.

I'd make some soup stock, cook some mushrooms, and mix in pepperoncino ingredients to make it slightly spicy and let it soak in the pasta's leftover hot water. If I could have my way, I'd be using dashi broth, soy sauce, tuna, onions, grated daikon, and boiled mushrooms to make Japanese-style pasta, but I didn't have canned tuna or soy sauce. If I had cod roe, I could make buttered roe pasta, or buttered walleye pollack roe pasta if I had that instead, but I couldn't expect that much from the fish in Deshmel...

Can't I take dashi broth, bacon, leafy vegetables, diced onions, diced garlic, mushrooms, spices, and olive oil to make something a bit more Japanese style? And add in some leftover dry basil for aroma... That could work.

And as I was lost in my escapist fantasies, I found myself standing before the dining hall.

Yeah... G-G-Good luck, Tina. You can do this. Even if I end up getting a poisoned portion, it's fine. If I get poisoned, I can just drink an antidote! And once I'm done eating, I'll get started on the fish sauce and go to bed!



AND so, I safely overcame the dangerous dinner and started working on the fish sauce. Incidentally, the Kapoperipe was...all right. It made my tongue a bit numb, but that was all, really...!

The process to make the fish sauce was pretty simple, so I could probably make a lot of it. And to prepare the fish sauce this

time, I took out something special.

Tada!

A four-liter jar! I put six pounds of fish in it. Different kinds of fish had different weights, so it was roughly six pounds. I added in around 2.2 pounds of salt—a third of the fish's weight. And since there was a lot of fish in the jar, I shook the jar to make sure the salt piled up at the bottom. I left the fish's internal organs as they were, since their decay produced enzymes that would help melt and ferment the whole fish. It would maintain the bitter taste of the grans, but it would ultimately produce a more savory fish sauce.

I'm so looking forward to it... Hehehe...

At first, I was grossed out by the idea, because who wants to eat rotted fish, right? But I figured that if it's commonly made, it's probably fine. A seasoning that tasted like fish soup stock and was savory had to be delicious, so I was dying to try it.

I closed the jar's lid, wrote the date, type of fish, and amount of salt on a sticker I plastered on the jar, and then took it to my storeroom. Apparently, a spot that was warm but not exposed to the sun was ideal, and the time it would take it to ferment would be a year or so. Giving it two years would deepen the flavor, producing a much thicker sauce. That idea was exciting in and of itself, and I decided to try to ferment one jar for two years another time.

I'll have to ask Nakona to get me more fish! Please, fishies, support my diet next year!

I hugged the jar, praying for it to turn out well, and returned to my room. As I turned in for the night, I resolved to finish the truth potion tomorrow.



DAY two of making the truth potion!

Let's do this! I need to pick up from where I left off last night.

I got as far as crushing the Brokensteel ivy and Fei Lu shell into powder. Next, I'd need to pour in lots and lots of mana, while I kept crushing and grinding it.

After a while, I started to huff and puff. I had no idea how long I'd been at it, but my hands were numb and my muscles were sore. I drank a mana restorative, as well as a potion that worked on sore muscles.

“...S-So how is it? Is it working?” I asked nervously.

I got the feeling the powder was still a little coarse, but I was getting tired of the grinding...

“No, I can’t slack off here,” I roused myself.

Nakona asked me for this, and we’re doing this so Shida and Sirius can make up...albeit they aren’t exactly fighting.

I shouted a little to raise my spirit and resumed the grinding, pouring in all the mana I could muster. The potion for pacifying muscle pains was working well, because I was feeling great.

“It’s ready!” I exclaimed.

I was done with the powder, but now I was all sweaty. High-difficulty potions really lived up to their name, but that made success that much more satisfying.

“Next, I just have to process the remaining ingredients. That’s the talking mushroom, the life powder, and the Mythical tail tuft. Those ingredients must be liquified. The earlier steps ensure the drinker opens up. In order to soothe the spirit and make the drinker more likely to spill their gut, these materials must be made into a liquid. The effects of this liquid will greatly influence the truth potion’s quality. I guess I can’t slack here, either, then. Let’s do it!”

I can’t afford to make slip-ups after all the work I put in!

With that thought in mind, I put the spoon in the pot and started grinding and stirring the ingredients, but then I experienced something unusual. It was the first time I encountered something like that in all my time practicing alchemy.

“Ugh...!”

I became dizzy, and all my mana slipped away at once. Using the mana restoration technique cured my dizziness at once, but I’ve never felt all my mana leave me like that before.

“Was it the Mythical’s tail tuft?” I wondered.

I brought Grandma’s recipe book over and looked into it while I recovered, and this was the only ingredient that could possibly be the reason. A Mythical’s tail tuft—an ingredient that’s typically easy to find in the Mythical continent. But to use it, one needed to pour in lots of mana, and tufts taken from more powerful Mythical Beasts consume exponentially more mana.

I got the tail tuft I used for this truth potion from Shinsen. Shinsen was an Orthrus, which was a very rare Mythical Beast, second only to dragons like Revireus. Apparently, only ten Orthrus exist in the entire world.

The Orthrus had a unique ability known as white fire, and were something of a younger brother race to the Cerberus—which was the race Renge’s father belonged to.

Since they were so rare, I had hoped an ingredient taken from one would make the truth potion stronger, but I didn’t expect it to sap that much mana out of me... I couldn’t keep up with the rate it was leeching mana from me, even with a mana restorative. So I slowed my pace, since working while I both drank a restorative and used the mana recovery technique in tandem wasn’t possible.

This was likely why this potion took days and required multiple people to work on it. And I tried to do it all on my own... I realized now how foolish and reckless I was being. But I decided to do it, and I wasn’t going to back down.

“Tina, are you still working on it?” I heard a knock on the door. It was Renge’s voice!

“Ah!”

Oh, why is Renge coming to check on me now?! I’m in my work clothes here, I can’t let him see me like this!

Not that he’d never seen me in my work clothes before, but I was currently exhausted from lack of mana and drenched in sweat...

“D-Do you need something?” I called nervously through the door, not letting him in.

“Ah, yeah. I just got a Mushumushu viper tail for you. Do you think you have a use for it?”

“What?!”

That was what they used to make Mushumushu viper ale! I remembered reading it could be used for an anesthetic! I’ve never made anesthetic before, and when Deshmel was attacked by monsters while I was away, it was a huge mess. Nakona and Shida successfully defended the fort back then, but many people ended up getting seriously hurt and losing limbs. Those people recovered thanks to my premade tonics, but if they needed surgery, an anesthetic would be a must.

In other words, if I made some anesthetic, I could have Giyaga sell it to other countries for a profit, just like my tonics!

“I’ll use it!” I said, opening the door enthusiastically.

“I thought you’d say that... How’s the truth potion going?” Renge asked with a smile.

“Uh-oh...”

I realized I had opened the door for him despite looking all sweaty in my work clothes. I didn't want him to see me like this. It was too late for that, but I wished he'd seen me in something cuter.

O-Or at least when I'm not all sweaty and worn out!

"W-Well, the truth potion kind of drained all my mana, so I'm recovering it right now," I admitted.

"It drained all of *your* mana? With your high capacity?" Renge asked, placing a jar with a snake stuffed in it on my material shelf. "What ingredients were you using?"

He approached my worktable and peered at my handiwork. I was surprised the potion had depleted my mana too. That had never happened in all the years I'd known Renge.

"I think the Mythical tail tuft is slurping up all my mana," I told him. "Apparently, you need multiple apothecaries to work on it for days to properly liquify it."

"I feel Shinsen's presence... Is this tuft from Shinsen?"

"Ah, yes. That's what I've heard," I said. "Apparently a powerful Mythical's tail is preferred for the recipe."

"Right," Renge nodded. "And Eure and Revi don't have furry tails."

Eure was a griffin, with a bird of prey's head and a lion's body. Much like a Mushumushu, they had viper-like tails...which meant their tails didn't have tufts. And Revireus was a dragon, which meant he was scaly, so his tail wasn't usable either. Jiril was a dryad, so her body was covered in bark and she had no tail, while Mirage was a lamia and had a scaly tail, too.

By process of elimination, Shinsen was my only option. And looking at it that way, it turns out that not many Mythicals have tufty tails...

"I could have given you some of my fur..." Renge said, looking a bit disappointed.

"If I'd used yours, I think it would have sucked up even more of my mana... I probably would've passed out..." I said with a dry smile.

I'd already recovered most of my mana, so I gulped down another restorative and picked up my spoon. I never ever wanted to feel the sensation of having all my mana deplete at once again...but if I didn't get to work, I'd never finish this potion.

"Mana, eh...? Want me to help you?" Renge offered.

"Huh? Renge, you know how to pour mana into a concoction?"

It takes practice,” I said, letting a skeptical note into my voice.

“I-I can manage that much, you know,” he said, looking a bit discouraged.

I thought it over. Renge probably had much more mana than I did, so if he helped me, we could end up finishing this faster. Could I really ask him to do that for me, though?

“What about your work, Renge?”

“Oh, it’s fine. If anything, we can’t really purify monsters while you’re locking yourself away in your study. Really, the faster you’re done with this, the better. That’s why I came to help, to be honest.”

“O-Oh, you’ve got a point there!”

That makes sense! I was so concentrated on my work yesterday that I completely forgot lunch!

“I’ll gladly accept your help, then!” I said.

“Okay. So, you just need me to put mana into the pot, right?” he asked. “Do you need a little? A lot?”

“A lot will do. It took a lot out of me,” I said.

“Hm, let me try.”

“All right!”

I started focusing on stirring and crushing the ingredients with the spoon. As I did, Renge poured mana into the pot, and the materials liquified rather quickly. Shinsen’s tail completely lost its shape. I had a feeling this would be the case, but Renge’s mana reserves really were impressive! And more impressive still was the fact he wasn’t worse for wear after pouring in this much mana.

“A-Are you all right, Renge?” I asked, concerned.



"I'm fine. Keep working, Tina. I'll handle the mana."

"A-All right. Thank you."

I took him up on his offer and got to work. I kept crushing the materials with the spoon, mixing in the mana until they turned into liquid. Renge still looked perfectly composed, but the amount of mana he was supplying was quite startling. It would have taken me a week to pour in this much mana on my own.

It really made me realize how amazing the Mythical Beasts are. They were truly this world's apex lifeforms. After all, I was a Spherit Folk, the race that was most proficient at mana recovery, but I was no match for him.

"Okay, it's all liquified! Thanks for helping, Renge," I told him.

"Don't mention it. So, are you done?"

"Not yet!"

"Oh, there's more," Renge said wearily.

Next was the final process of refining the ingredients. I needed to mix water, Deshmel scorpion tail venom, and powdered red toadstool until they turned into liquid.

"...All right, let's do this," I roused myself.

"Do you need my help?" Renge offered.

"No, these ingredients don't really take much mana, so I'll be fine."

I poured 500ml of water into the pot and added the lethal Deshmel scorpion tail venom and the powdered red toadstool, which was dangerous to the touch. I stirred them together, adding mana to the concoction...until the mixture lit up.

And, done!

And for the final step, I placed all the ingredients I had made so far into the pot. The order was important, though. I put the wild berry, which served as a neutralizer, into the liquid I had mixed. It neutralized the toxicity of the two venoms, leaving only their beneficial traits. When the Deshmel scorpion and the red toadstool lost their toxicity, they produced a matter similar to strong alcohol that brought on a sense of pleasant elation that wasn't too addictive.

Such lowly-addictive but exhilarating drugs were abused by certain religious organizations to draw in new recruits. But since you needed to mix in powerful toxins to make them, there were times when they failed in extracting the narcotic element, leading

to many people dying. Because of this, their use became outlawed. I couldn't help but feel that's what they got for trying to abuse a substance like this, but at the same time, you had to feel bad for the deceased...

As such, I was worried about handling these lethal poisons. I needed to be sure I had properly removed the toxins.

I used Appraisal magic to check the concoction, and it confirmed that it had no active toxins in it. Good. So this amount of mana was sufficient.

With the poison neutralized, I added the Fei Lu shell and the Brokensteel ivy I'd spent so much time crushing into powder to the mixture. I mixed them together while adjusting just the right amount of mana, blending them together but not to the point where they perfectly mixed.

It felt like getting just the right amount of mana was hard. I had to do it, since there were other materials to mix in, but finding the right balance was challenging and exciting. Working on concoctions I've never made before was educational, to be sure. It put me in situations where me being a Spherit Folk didn't necessarily guarantee everything would go well.

"And now I add the liquid you helped me make with the Mythical Beast tail tuft," I told Renge.

Like earlier, I mixed it so it didn't perfectly blend together. I poured in a moderate amount of mana and mixed it.

"Lastly, I need to add the flavors, so I put in the poteto juice and patty sauce...and then mix it until it's ready." I continued stirring the full concoction, pouring in mana as I mixed, but...

Ugh, this is...kind of hard!

"Let me help you," Renge offered.

"Ah, thank you."

Renge poured in the mana, allowing me to focus on stirring. That said, Renge did have a great deal of mana, so there was a chance it would accidentally condense the concoction. To that end, I had to ask him to adjust how much mana he added and then ask him to stop so I could apply the final touches.

I mixed the mana in thoroughly, stirring and churning. It was a first time experience for me to see mana spread so inconsistently within the pot. To adjust for that, I added small amounts of mana here and there, mixed the concoction, and when I found more spots without sufficient mana, I repeated the process.

The concoction gradually took on a gelatinous texture, at which point I added more small amounts of mana until the jelly-like liquid turned smooth.

“This is very time-consuming,” Renge noted.

“Yeah, but I think I’m almost done,” I replied.

As the pinkish jelly-like concoction turned to clear liquid, it took on a crimson shade instead. It was a pretty color. Spots of what looked like golden dust started appearing on its surface; this struck me as something familiar.

One time, when I was making high-grade tonics, I accidentally created a supreme tonic, and it had gold dust just like this.

“Ah!”

And then, the pot shined with a pop. This was the same glow as when I completed a potion. That meant it was ready.

“Thank you, Renge!” I exclaimed. “I think it’s done. I guess I couldn’t make it on my own, after all.”

“Don’t mention it,” he smiled. “I just poured a little mana in. I figured you’d be pushing yourself to finish it, since it was a request from Nakona. It’s a good thing I came to help.”

“Ugh...” I couldn’t deny it.

Nakona had asked me for a favor, so, yes, I felt obligated to work hard on it.

“Besides...I’m just glad I got to help you, Tina,” Renge said.

“Why’s that?” I tilted my head.

“I’m not sure if I ever told you this, but my uncle was trying to be an alchemical apothecary—well, he was trying to be an alchemist, alchemical apothecaries weren’t a profession at the time. When my mother was stricken with disease, he shut himself away in his study, spending days at a time making medicine. He said there must have been a medicine to save her. Saying this, he worked himself to the bone, forgoing sleep.”

As it turned out, Renge’s human mother had passed away from illness in her home on the peak of Mount Rofola. At the time, she lived there with her brother, her husband, and Renge. In order to teach Renge the transience of human life, to show him how a person lets their lifespan run out, she refused to drink the miracle medicine her brother had concocted and passed away. I’m not sure if I can agree with her decision to leave Renge alone, when she could have lived, but I’m not her. I have no way of knowing what else was at play at the time.

According to Renge, her younger brother was very frustrated to see his sister pass away from illness. He worked so tirelessly to make medicine for her, that even his nephew, Renge, could see how hard he was working.

“He tried to make an elixir of life...and if she would have been willing to drink it, I do believe she would have recovered,” Renge recounted sadly. “But his efforts were for naught. I saw him...work so hard for it, and yet...”

Indeed, a miracle drug that heals all diseases and increases one’s lifespan must have been infinitely more difficult to make than a mere truth potion.

“When I saw my uncle shut himself away in his room day after day, I wanted to help him. I always...wanted to help him,” Renge continued, his desire from all those years ago bringing an emotional tone to his voice. “He was working so hard for my mother’s sake, after all, and I wanted to heal her illness, too. I believed in him, I was sure he’d heal her someday, and I’d have been happy to help him if I could.”

“I see,” I said solemnly.

I could understand why when they all lived together. In the end, Renge’s mother never did take the miracle cure her brother had successfully concocted. Not even for her son... No matter how I try, I still can’t come to accept that decision of hers.

“You locking yourself away in your room the past two days just...reminded me of what happened back then. So, I’m glad I was able to help you at least,” he said with a sad smile.

“I’m glad you were here, too. You helped me out a lot,” I told him.

“That’s good to hear,” he smiled.

“Thank you. Really.” I returned his smile.

Let’s bottle this baby up, then. So it says one dose is 8ml... Wait, 8ml?

“Wait, I need little bottles for this!” I panicked. “Do I have enough of those? Do I have enough flasks for small amounts like this?! There’s a total of 800ml of this thing in the pot! I don’t have enough bottles or flasks for it!”

“A-Are you all right?” Renge asked, baffled by my sudden flustered state.

“No, I’m not all right!”

In the end, I found one small flask for Nakona's share and stored the rest in a large bottle which I shipped out to De Marl.



A few days later...

"Tina, you're not gonna believe this!" Nakona hurried into the dining hall while I was cooking breakfast.

"Hey, Nakona," I greeted her. "Did something happen?"

"Listen, now's not the time for morning greetings, okay?! I had Sirius and Shida drink the truth potion and the fruit ale mixed with the Mushumushu viper ale yesterday!" she said in an excited rush.

"Oh, so they sat down for a drink. How did it go?"

So, the potion finally made its debut?

I was in the middle of making meat and potato stew with fish sauce I bought from Fei Lu. Nakona sounded pretty flustered, so I stopped working and looked at her curiously.

Did they end up getting closer than expected and started acting chummy in a creepy way? I wondered.

"Well, you see... Lys, Vector, and Gawain came over, and the five of them started drinking together..." she began.

"Uh-huh..." I hummed casually before the meaning of what Nakona had just said hit me. "Hold on. Don't tell me they—"

"Yeah, it turned out exactly like you'd think!" she cried. "Lys, Gawain, and Vector all started saying they actually love me!"

Oh, no. All hell broke loose!

The Mushumushu viper ale made them drop veritable bombshells while her fiancé was in the room!

"I had no idea that's how they felt! I was shocked," Nakona told me in all sincerity.

"Wow, I see. You really never noticed, did you?" I asked her, one eyebrow cocked.

"What? You knew about it, Tina?!"

"W-Well, those three were pretty transparent..." I sighed.

"No way?!" she shouted.

Still, the three-color knights sure picked the worst possible time to finally make their feelings known. They did it right in front of Shida and Sirius. That must have been scary. Although, I guess they didn't really have a choice...given they unknowingly consumed a truth potion and

viper ale...

"W-Well, get this...now they want to duke it out at our inn!" Nakona exclaimed.

"Wow, they took it that far, huh...? What happened next?"

That sounded like a headache.

Why do those meatheads have to go right to fisticuffs?!

But that said, given enough time to chant a spell, Shida could possibly take all three of them out at once. His title as Elf of the Sun was well-earned. He was my magic teacher, after all. But just the same, the knight trio stood a chance if they distracted him while he cast his spell.

Shida is defenseless while chanting, so if they joined forces, they could possibly beat him... Wait, but what if Shida losses?!

"Well, you see, I figured them ganging up on Shida like that wouldn't be right, would it?" Nakona continued. "So Sirius and me are gonna team up with Shida, so it'll be a fair, three-on-three fight!"

"You'll what?!"

I didn't expect that!

Nakona always seemed to approach things in ways I wouldn't expect...

I feel bad for the three-color knights. They confessed to their crush, only for her to team up with the new man in her life against them!

"Uh, so who came up with the bright idea to make things get physical?" I asked.

"It was Gawain's idea, but Lys and Vector got on board right away."

"Hmm..."

In that case, they probably deserved it for picking the fight. They could have at least suggested a fair tournament or something.

"But those three are De Marl knight captains now, you know?" Nakona carried on. "I figured them getting hurt would cause problems."

"Right."

Those three being as important as they are...that could lead to serious political problems.

"W-Wait," I looked at Nakona with wide eyes. "You're serious about duking it out with them?"

"Of course," Nakona said with a straight face.

I could only stare at her in disbelief.

"I mean, they can tell me they love me all they want now, but I've decided to marry Shida," Nakona explained.

"Wow," I said. *Did Nakona just brag about her fiancé to me?*

I was honestly anxious about giving Nakona away to that perverted old elf...but I was also aware of how powerful Shida was.

"So I need you to sell me lots of tonics," she said. "I know those three are strong, but Shida and Sirius hang in the back, and I'll be the frontliner. I think I can handle both Gawain and Vector at once, but honestly, I don't know how much self-control I'll be able to have in that kind of high-pressure fight. I might hit them too hard."

"So you're afraid you'll end up injuring *them*." I had to suppress a laugh. I don't know why I ever thought it would be the other way around. "Fine, will five large medium-grade tonics do? I'll go get them."

"Yeah! Thanks!"

Mister Sirius could probably take it easy against the three knights, but Nakona was terrible at controlling her strength. And since the three knights were used to sparring with Nakona, they'd know better than to hold back themselves.

In other words, some bloodshed is to be expected. Good grief.

I went back to my room with Nakona and pulled out five large bottles of medium-grade tonics. A large bottle contained roughly ten times the amount of a normal dose, meaning that was about fifty doses of tonic. I could only hope this would be enough.

Shida could use healing magic, so I assumed they'd be fine even if they did run a little short. And since they'd be fighting at our inn, there should still be a stock of the tonics I sent back home periodically.

"You know what?" I said to Nakona. "Take this, too. To be on the safe side!"

"Wait, is that a large high-grade tonic bottle?" Nakona asked. "I can have it?!"

"If any's leftover, just put it in the medicine locker at home!" I told her.

"Oh, you little worrywart. Thanks, though."

Nakona placed the five medium-grade and one high-grade tonic bottles in a wooden crate, which she then lifted effortlessly. She always surprised me with her brute strength; I could never pick that heavy thing up.

And that's not because I'm weak or anything!

We made our way out of my room and into the corridor back to the dining hall.

"How could I not worry about you?" I sighed. "And what are you going to do if Lys and the others end up winning? You're not gonna break up with Shida, right?"

"No, even if they asked me to do that, I wouldn't listen. They said something about going out on a date if they win?" she said casually.

"A date!" I exclaimed.

That made sense—they wanted to make an impression on her by taking her out somewhere nice. Now that she knew how they felt, Nakona would probably view them differently, after all! And they might be lucky enough to see Nakona in a cute outfit.

"But I'm not gonna lose this fight, for sure," Nakona said confidently.

"Really now?"

"I mean, I haven't even been on a date with Shida yet, and if I lose, I'll have to go on a date with each of them, right? That's taking three days off from the inn! I'd be worried about René and Moné!"

"Nakona, can't you consider the knights' feelings a little?" I asked her. "I'm starting to feel bad for them."

"They're all good guys. They should hurry up and give up on me and find someone nice," Nakona shrugged. "Wouldn't it be crueler to have them get their hopes up?"

"Y-You think?"

I supposed there was some logic to that.

"Well, that, and I never really saw them as men, so going on a date with them would just feel weird," she said flatly.

Okay, yeah, I do feel bad for them.

"In other words, Tina!" Nakona said in a sudden loud voice.

"Y-Yes?!" I jumped.

"If I win this match, Shida will have to take me out on a date! Awesome, right?"

"...And that was why you came to me for help?" I asked.

"Yep!"

"Yeah, I can see why you want to win." I nodded sagely.

For Nakona, a date with Shida was much more important than anything else. After all, Nakona was working at the inn, while Shida

was traveling the world to explain the situation involving the Kaguya with a Will of its Own and how to resist it to the different countries. They didn't really have many chances to go out together.

I silently looked out the corridor's window, up at the Sugula in the sky. It was blotting out the sunlight, making the land dark regardless of the time of day. The fact we were actually getting used to eternal darkness felt like proof that the predatory star's presence was becoming a given for us. It was hard to believe it wasn't there just a few years ago.

Without sufficient sunlight, crops wouldn't grow. Moné told me, in one of her letters, that Mount Rofola's woods were losing their vigor. Before long, the herbs in my garden would also start dying.

With the moons and stars hidden away, every night was as dark as a new moon. It was hard to dry the laundry, and even during summer, the temperatures remained low and chilly. I couldn't recall the last time I wore a short-sleeved outfit. The average temperature was sticking to the cold side.

...Really, the Sugula is a catastrophe for us just by floating up in the sky.

And having that thing hanging over one's head felt like it would just suck the fun out of any date.

"When I first saw it three years ago, it was as small as a speck, but now it's covering the entire sky," Nakona said, noticing me looking up. She placed the medicine crate on the floor and joined me in gazing out the window.

"Yeah, but it's still too far for Renge to burn it away," I said.

"So it needs to get even bigger and closer for Renge to burn it, huh? By that point, it'll probably completely blot out the sky."



"Yeah, probably," I agreed. "I still can't believe something this big is near our planet, though."

"Oh, totally. It just doesn't feel real at all, you know?"

"Agreed."

A monster that sucks up Kathra and Camilla from the surface of our world to mature. I spent my days here in Deshmel, at the world's navel, to purify monsters drawn in by a monster-attracting barrier. But despite that, it was still maturing to such a size...

But it did make sense. To begin with, I was told that it would take anywhere from one to three decades to fully purify all the monsters. Still, it made me feel bad that the Sugula was maturing, and I, as the only force that impeded its growth, was living such a sheltered life. I wasn't sure what would happen next, but according to Renge, the Sugula would need to get even closer and bigger before it could be destroyed.

I was anxious even despite knowing all this, so I could only imagine how frightened people who were completely ignorant as to what the Sugula was must have been.

"It's strange," I said. "The end of the world is so visible and in reach, but...we're just living our days normally."

"But you're here in Deshmel to fix this situation," Nakona noted.

"Yes, but I don't really feel involved."

"Well, it is what it is. I think it's better than you feeling needlessly responsible or involved in all this. Maybe doing this just comes naturally to you, or something like that?"

"Is that how it works?" I asked doubtfully.

"Don't worry about it," Nakona shook her head. "Just leading a normal life is the hardest part already."

"...I guess that's true."

Nakona was right. Leading a peaceful life didn't come easy in this world full of bandits, warring nations, and monsters. I moved into Fort Deshmel, where I spent my days using the Stella's powers to purify monsters. And the fact this was just my everyday life didn't strike me as abnormal.

Even though it was certainly strange and unusual...and scary.

Mister Giyaga, the merchant, often worried about the way I spent my days, but from my perspective, a traveling merchant like him was handling a much more dangerous job. And he did it like he

always did, like nothing's changed. And that was much more difficult than it seemed, and much more impressive of a feat than most would admit.

"Still, my date with Shida is its own thing. I'll beat those three, take Shida out on a date and knock him out," Nakona said.

"What's your idea of a date, Nakona?"

I wished I could cheer Nakona on, but I got the feeling that doing that was all sorts of scary. Her image of what a date was didn't feel like it matched up with mine.

What do I do? I guess it'd be best if she just won and took Shida out on a date her way, but...would that actually be peaceful? I can't tell...

I could only hope Shida would make it through whatever came his way. He was this generation's Elf of the Sun, after all. And he was the one who picked Nakona as his bride—he'd have to be able to overcome this predicament himself.



A few days later...

"I can't decide what to make now that I'm done with the truth potion... Hmm, what should I make next?" I was alone in my room, gazing at the open recipe book, when I heard a knock on the door.

"Tinaaaa~!" I heard Nakona call out to me from the other side of the door.

Aaah, I thought to myself in a carefree manner as I opened the door. *Their fight must have ended.*

"Wh-What do I do...?" I was greeted by a helpless-looking, red-faced Nakona. "H-He said dates are about...making out..."

"Hm..." I looked at her, shocked. "How about we go get something to drink at the dining hall for now?"

I was afraid to ask for details but decided to make Nakona some tea for now.

"What did you think dates were about, Nakona?" I asked.

"Well, you know. A boy and a girl meeting up at an agreed-upon spot."

"Hm, yes, I guess that's technically correct..."

Each word in that definition wasn't wrong. At least on a surface level.

“But Mom taught me that the objective changes depending on the level of intimacy between the couple,” she said.

“Oh...”

That’s not entirely wrong, either, I thought to myself as I set a platter of cookies in front of Nakona.

“When they’re not a couple, people go on dates to become more intimate,” Nakona continued. “And when they are, they do it to confirm how compatible they are...”

“Yes, I think that’s about right,” I nodded.

I didn’t have a very positive image of Nakona’s mother. She cheated on and eventually left Dad, after all. But apparently, she did educate Nakona well enough. Though I did hear that after she got remarried, she mostly shut Nakona up in her room, where she forced her to study.

“So, she told me that after you’re in a relationship, you should do relationship-worthy things when you go on dates...” Nakona carried on.

“Ah, yes, that sounds about right.”

That also sounded correct, if a bit too abstract and open to interpretation. That said, I had no experience going on dates myself, so I couldn’t say for sure...

“So, in our case, I figured it meant a duel, right?! We’d like, go somewhere far away, and we’d train, practice techniques together, and come up with new attacks!”

“H-Huuuh?!” I stared at my sister, wide-eyed.

That gave me a good grasp of what Nakona’s idea of a date was. It wasn’t technically wrong, but in practice, it was completely off the mark! That meant it’d be hard to explain what she got wrong. At the same time, I had no experience dating either, so it wasn’t like I was confident I’d be able to explain it to her anyway!

So at times like these...

“Let’s ask Mirage and Jiril!” I proposed.

“R-Right!” Nakona nodded vigorously.

Sadly, both of us sisters had no experience when it came to romance, so we decided to ask women who were more seasoned than us. We told them what Nakona’s definition of a date was, and asked what she could do...

“Why, it’s obvious, hm!” Jiril said animatedly. “You eat good food, and then lure him somewhere that’s dim and romantic, and give him a big, hot kiss!”

“What?! No! I can’t do that!” Nakona shook her head in alarm. “Jiril, we’re talking about Shida here! I can’t take him somewhere dim! I’m pretty sure that’s illegal! I’ll get thrown in jail!”

“H-Hm, I suppose that’s true!” The Mythical woman was convinced by Nakona’s explanation right away.

He might have been a perverted old elf in his late fifties, but in terms of appearances, he looked like a kid, while Nakona looked like a mature woman... It didn’t look right. In all sorts of ways.

“Then how about an indooooooooor date?” Mirage asked. “A nice walk along the Rhio de laaake, taking in the clean air of Mount Rofola... And then you lead him into the wooodds...”

“What if the guests see us?” Nakona pouted.

“I suppose that’s a probleeeeeem...”

This is harder than I thought!

Nakona was right, though. If the guests saw them, it’d get in the way of business. And it’d be very uncomfortable if René and Moné saw them. In other words, it was dangerous from just about every angle.

“If it’s too difficult, why not go on a daaaaaate somewhere on the demi-human continent? Or maybe the Mythicaaaaaal continent?”

“The Elf of the Sun can use teleportation magic, right, hm?”

“He can?” I asked.

“Ah, y-yeah,” Nakona nodded.

I thought only the Mythicals could use such advanced magic...and Shida learned how to do it, too? That’s great! I guess that perverted old elf really is something else when it comes to magic!

“But having him carry me in his arms sounds kind of annoying. Like I’m some sorta damsel in distress or something,” Nakona said, her lips curled into a scowl.

“Th-That’s your problem?” I asked.

After all, she was going to marry Shida. Was there a place for that kind of rivalry in their relationship?

“Then why not let the Elf of the Sun decide on where you go, hm? I think it’s best to let the gentleman do the leading at times like these. It’ll show you how much you mean to him, hm.”

“You think?!” Nakona and I asked as one.

The two Mythical ladies regarded us with inexplicable smiles. I wasn’t sure what those expressions were supposed to mean!

“If he cares about his ‘girlfriend,’ he’ll put thought into the date spot and what to eat, hm? And put another way, you should

consider what he wants and keep that in mind too, hm.”

“That kind of mutual consideration is what loooooove is all about!”

Nakona and I exchanged silent looks. Thinking about the other person, confirming that they felt about you as strongly as you felt for them, and getting closer. I never knew dates had such depth to them...

“So I think you should leave deciding the details of the date to the Elf of the Sun, hm,” Jiril said.

“Agreeeeed,” Mirage said.

“W-Well, I guess I’ll just leave it to Shida, then,” Nakona concluded, looking not-too-dissatisfied.

“What is this all about?” a voice cut into our conversation.

“Whoa!” I jolted. “R-Renge!”

Renge approached us. I could understand why; after all, the four of us girls were huddled together in a corner of the dining hall. But this wasn’t a topic we wanted him involved in. And Revireus was with him, too.

“Snacks this early?! That’s not fair, you four!” Revireus chided us.

“My, then allow me to serve you some cookies too, Lord Revireus, hm,” Jiril said.

“Good,” Lord Revireus nodded. Easily satisfied, as ever...

And Renge, ever the sweets monster, munched on the cookies happily, too.

“Nakona, I thought you weren’t scheduled to come today,” he said. “Did something happen?”

“Oh, k-kinda. I’m going out on a date with Shida, and I’m kind of at my wit’s end. So I came here to consult with Tina.”

“Oh yeah, you two got into a relationship, huh?” Renge said. “It really took me by surprise.”

“Did it?” Nakona asked, sounding surprised he was surprised.

I couldn’t believe it myself yet. Renge apparently felt the same way, judging by his doubtful expression. Honestly, I wasn’t sure how Nakona quite got to the point of dating...

“Come to think of it, you beat Lys, Gawain, and Vector, right?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah. Sirius actually fought as a vanguard, too. He was annoyingly strong...” Nakona said, sounding a little spiteful.

“Wait, Mister Sirius helped you fight them head-on?!” I

gasped.

"I know, isn't it weird?!" Nakona cried, slamming a fist against the table.

I felt something tremble. Was that a bad topic to bring up?

"He used magic to wield his staff like a sword. Isn't that like, really unfair? It pisses me off! He handled Vector like he was nothing!"

I felt bad for the three-color knights. I didn't know Mister Sirius was good at sword fighting...

"But wasn't your plan to improve relations between the Elf of the Sun and Sirius?" Renge asked Nakona. "That's what you got the ale and Tina's truth potion for, right?"

That was true, but somehow things ended up with them battling the knight trio instead.

"Yes, well, that was the plan, but Lys and the others walked in on their drinking bout..." Nakona said. "All five of them ended up drinking from the barrel I mixed that Mushumushu ale into and drank the truth potion."

"Huh?!" everyone present exclaimed.

As it turned out, my truth potion worked perfectly. There was only a small amount, but apparently, those three drank the truth potion I'd prepared for Shida and Mister Sirius.

I know I ended up making too much, but I only gave Nakona one small bottle of it!

"Nakona, where did you store the truth potion I gave you?!" I asked.

"Well, I figured if they got drunk and still wouldn't be frank with each other, I'd have them drink it. So I put it on the table. And those three just walked in and each took a swig..."

"H-Hm. Well, I guess that's that..." was all I could manage to say.

I only gave Nakona one small bottle. And they split up that small dosage between the three of them. Nakona had prepared both the alcohol and the truth potion so that if they decided that they had no choice but to resort to the truth potion to be honest with themselves, they'd be able to choose to drink it. The idea was that they'd consent to take it willingly, to improve their relations.

But then Lys and Gawain stormed in and drank the liquor mixed with the truth potion, and it made them confess to her, and Vector piggybacked off of them doing it to drum up the courage to

confess too. In other words...

"Sirius and Shida didn't end up drinking the truth potion? After all the trouble we went through to make it?" I asked, aghast.

"Yep..." Nakona nodded.

That was the worst part for me, honestly! After all the work I put in... The truth potion I painstakingly made got wasted like that...and the people I made it for never even took it!

I still had another small bottle left, but I sent the jar over to Mister Giyaga, for him to sell it in De Marl. Asking Nakona to gather all the ingredients again would have been hard.

But wait... Maybe I should make it again.

Making difficult potions like this would improve my technique, so it was worth trying again. And maybe this time I could make it all on my own, without help!

"So, are the Elf of the Sun and Sirius still on bad terms?" Renge asked.

"Surprisingly enough, no," Nakona replied. "Drinking that Mushumushu Viper ale thing really helped them open up... Well, I guess you could say they're doing better than they used to be."

"I see. So I guess the ale was more effective than the truth potion?" Renge said.

"You could say that. Say, Renge, could you get us more of this Mushumushu ale thing?" Nakona requested. "Oh, how much does it cost? I'll pay for it."

Jiril and Mirage ended up drinking most of our ale last time, after all...

I did wonder what the market price for Mushumushu Viper ale was, though. I assumed it was pricey, since it was from the Mythical continent.

"I don't know how much it costs here on the human continent, but on the Mythical continent, it costs about 10,000 colts," Renge answered.

"Wow, that's pricier than I thought..." Nakona mused.

"Well, it's made from cutting off a Mushumushu's tail," he pointed out.

"So that's part of the price," I said. "I think that's a reasonable price, Nakona. I mean, you can only find Mushumushu on the Mythical continent."

"Ah, r-right. I guess that's true. They have to harvest tails from that thing to make it..."

“Yep.”

When you put it like that, it really made it clear how sturdy Mushumushu were. Even if you cut off their viper-like tails, they grew back. I imagined it must have hurt, though...

“Still, I never imagined the truth potion I worked so hard to make would be used for that...” I muttered, a bit gloomy.

“S-Sorry,” Nakona said. “But when I mixed the Mushumushu ale into their barrel, those two blockheads started getting along pretty well...”

“Well, I guess that’s good, but it still leaves me feeling a little dissatisfied...”

I could just make more truth potion to polish my skills, and I’d take my time to make it all on my own this time, so it wasn’t all bad.

“For now, I’ll just leave planning the date to Shida, and I finished asking Renge for more of that ale... Yeah, I think I’m mostly done with my errands here, so I’ll head back home. Sorry for dropping in on you like that, Tina,” Nakona said.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Besides, who says you’re going home?” I said with an evil smile.

“What?” Nakona blinked.

I looked to Jiril and Mirage, who nodded with the same impish smile. We weren’t just going to let Nakona go home like this. Why did she even think we’d let her go peacefully after she brought up certain topics with us?

“Did you hear, Nakona?” I told her. “Recently, we’ve been having monthly fashion shows here at Fort Deshmel. You know, as a pastime for all the people working here. And our fashion show’s been pretty popular. It even resulted in some couples getting married.”

“Yeah?” Nakona looked at me, surprised. “Is that right? What about it?”

Revireus, who was snacking on cookies with Renge, seemed to have picked up on my intentions and made an expression of realization.

I rose from my seat and approached Nakona so she couldn’t escape. “So, you’re going on a date, right? On what day? Because we could make you an outfit for the date and get your makeup done! I know you like clothes that are easy to move in, so we’ll get three girls with experience in sewing to make you something, and

—”

“Huh?! Hold up, Tina! What are you thinking?!” Nakona cut me off.

“Well, I’m thinking of getting the girls who helped with the fashion show to make you a nice outfit for your date. Don’t worry, they even make the fabric on their own!”

“What are you talking about, ‘don’t worry’?! I-I don’t want this! If I put that much effort into the date, it’ll just go to Shida’s head and stroke his ego!”

“What’s wrong with that? You’ll get an ego boost, too. I mean, it might be weird for you, but Dad always said you’re pretty because you got your looks from your mom. So if you just went all-out with your looks, you’ll have Shida wrapped around your little finger!”

But that said, I honestly just wanted to dress Nakona up. When Dad’s friend passed away and we went to his funeral, Nakona wore a dress, and she was absolutely gorgeous. I kept thinking about how good she looked, even though we were at a funeral.

And since this was a date, she was allowed to go all out. I wanted Shida to kneel in the face of Nakona’s beauty. And so, I was determined to mercilessly dress Nakona up.

Jiril and Mirage called the fashion show’s participants over, and I left Nakona in their capable hands. They took her measurements, and I was sure they’d come up with a great design for her in no time. Once Nakona and Shida decided on a day for the date, the ladies would have a dress ready for her on time.

“Making an outfit for a pretty girl is always exciting, hm!” Jiril said. “This month’s fashion show is going to be exciting!”

“Yes, yeeees! Ah, then how about next moooooonth we have the Holy Woman be our model? I’m sure everyone wants to make a daaaaaate outfit for her!”

“I-I’m good!” I shook my head.

“Oh, that’s a good idea, hm! Don’t you think so, Lord Renge?”

“You want to see the Holy Woman in a fancy outfit, riiiiight?”

“H-Huh? What are you asking me for?!” Renge asked, alarmed.

“J-Jiril! Mirage!” I chided the two Mythical ladies.

Incidentally, after the date, Nakona became cuter than ever. That left me with some mixed feelings.

♣ A Daughter Is...

“HUUUUH?! Nakona is goin’ on a date with Shida?!” I was stunned by Eure’s report.

“That’s what I’ve heard,” he said. “Human children really do grow up fast.”

“UAGH...” I groaned.

In order to make it easier for Tinaris to operate from Fort Deshmel, I was traveling all over the world, letting countries know what they had to do to prevent their people from becoming hosts to the Kaguya with a Will of its Own.

It was during one of my most recent trips abroad that I learned that my oldest daughter, Nakona, got a boyfriend. And to my shock, this boyfriend was someone I knew—Shida, this generation’s Elf of the Sun. He was older than his boyish looks, which wasn’t unusual for an elf. I didn’t care how he looked. The problem was, he was older than *me*. And any father alive wouldn’t be happy about that.

My daughter’s boyfriend is older than me.

You can imagine how the whole thing would leave me with some very mixed feelings. What’s worse, he looked like a child, and even younger than my daughter. It gave me all sorts of headaches, really.

And now my daughter and this strange boyfriend of hers were going on their first *date*. I heard about it from a third party, and I could just barely take that, but if Nakona were to tell me that herself, I’d probably pass out right then and there.

Don’t get me wrong—I wasn’t particularly opposed to their relationship. Shida was strong. I knew that much from experience. Elves were more proficient than other races in many fields, after all. And Shida wasn’t just any elf, he was a high elf. In other words, he was royalty.

Shida was an elven princess’s son. Since his father, Sirius, was a half-elf, he didn’t have any claim to the throne, but he still inherited the most dignified title in elven society, the Elf of the Sun.

That on its own was impressive.

And for whatever reason, Shida fancied my daughter and decided to court her with marriage in mind. And while it was all quite dubious in terms of appearances, I wanted to support Nakona's choice as her father.

But if I could have my way, I'd much rather not have to hear about her going on dates with the perverted elf...

I was curious about how her relationship was going, of course, but hearing about it really drove home the reality that my oldest daughter was on her way to marrying out of the family, a prospect that weighed on my fatherly heart.

And while my adorable little girls were out spending time with the boys in their lives, I hardly had a chance to see them anymore...

"Maybe I should drop by Rofola..." I pondered aloud.

"Oh, Rofola and not Deshmel?" Eure asked.

"Tinaris can handle herself. But René and Moné are still kids and can use an adult in their life," I said. Of course, I would love to see my Tinaris too.

"Oh, I see. Well, I think you don't need to worry about the little ones. They have Mujimuji with them," Eure said like that was the most reassuring thing in the world.

Eure and the other Mythicals seemed to really trust Mujimuji—that small, unidentified critter that followed René and Moné around—a great deal. I still had no idea what it was. A Mythical of some sort? If it was, they could have just told me, and I'd believe them. I didn't understand why they needed to make it so ambiguous.

"Let's fly, then," Eure told me.

"Y-Yes, please."

The Mythicals' teleportation magic was very convenient, allowing them to jump to wherever they needed to be in the blink of an eye. But the fact I needed to hold hands with them was a bit uncomfortable. Eure didn't seem to mind, but I did!

But while I was suppressing my embarrassment, I soon found myself looking at the contours of Mount Rofola, the trees of the endless forest, and the clear waters of Lake Rhio. Looking a little to the left, I spotted the familiar inn.

Our family inn was once thoroughly wrecked by a monster attack, but thanks to Tina, the place was rebuilt and expanded into a fairly large facility. Those lacking in coin could set up tents at

Lake Rhiode's shoreline, interacting with other campers while they caught and cooked their own meals.

The campsite was Tina's idea. It cost less than a room at the inn, but was located in a popular spot. Guests could pay an extra fee to rent out fishing gear or order takeout from the inn. This was just one example of the many unique ideas Tina came up with for raising money.

She had a hot spring set up on the mountain's peak, and had a road paved leading to it, making the Rofola Lodge a spot travelers considered a must-stay. What's more, Tina's sweets and confection recipes drew in many guests, and her potions and tonics were indispensable to travelers on the road.

Recently, she's been brewing medicine at Fort Deshmel and sending it to Rofola in exchange for fresh food. But more surprising still was that *Moné*, the younger sister of the twins we took in a few years ago, started imitating her and tried brewing medicine, too. She could very well become an alchemical apothecary someday, just like Tina. Though I did think matching Tina's talents would be quite difficult for a human child...

"Are you going to stay the night here?" Eure asked.

"Yes, I think we should," I replied. "Staying at home for once would be a nice change of pace."

"And where will we be headed tomorrow?"

"De Marl. It's a large country, so the local faith there is very deeply rooted. Honestly, I still can't believe the Gods of De Marl don't exist..."

"That won't make you very convincing then..." Eure shook his head.

Faith is what supports people through their daily lives and hard times. Being told the gods you believed in your whole life were just made up by the politicians to help govern the people was a hard pill to swallow. Those gods have served as emotional support for people since De Marl was formed centuries ago, so me dropping by a few times to convince them otherwise wouldn't achieve much. Some of De Marl's most influential politicians were already showing signs of disapproval at the idea of converting from the Gods of De Marl to faith in the Holy Woman.

Trying to force them to change their traditions just made them more resistant to the idea of converting, and instead made them stick to their current beliefs even harder. Going about it too

forcefully just wasn't the right way. According to Sirius, "Faith occurs more easily when people are isolated."

And to begin with, the Gods of De Marl weren't a terrible system of belief to begin with. Many people were saved by that faith being there for them. I, myself, was one such person. And so, rather than trying to convince people to discard something that never did them harm, I considered maybe they could start by believing in both the Holy Woman and the Gods of De Marl.

It wouldn't resolve the problem of Kathra and Camilla filling the continent right away, but it was a starting point in easing them toward the Holy Woman and preferable to forcing everyone to convert now. But still, paving the way to even this attempt at compromise required a lot of stuffy meetings. And most problematic were the higher-ups of the country who weren't so much lazy as they were self-interested and greedy. They benefited the most with donations and taxes from stores associated with the Gods of De Marl. For them, it was a very successful business they didn't want to lose.

"Just thinking about it gives me a headache," I groaned.

"Humans really are bothersome," Eure said. "All the other faiths besides the Holy Woman are false. If they're going to insist on denying her, we may have to burn them to the ground. At least the ones who don't convert. Starting from scratch might simply be easier. Their resistance is putting the entire planet at risk." He glanced toward the Sugula's black spot growing ever larger in the sky.

I held my tongue as I looked at him. The Mythicals, and some of the demi-human races too, could be very extreme in their faith in the Holy Woman. Many of them believed all other faiths except for the Holy Woman's were to be destroyed, and Eure probably shared that opinion, too. Renge probably knew this, and this was why he placed me in charge of converting people on the human continent. And he often had Eure help me move around, hoping it might teach him to be tolerant of other faiths.

If Eure thought he could treat other religions however he pleased, he was no better than Edesa Kura. And our current Holy Woman, Tina, would surely disapprove of that more than anything. But Eure knew this, and this was why he never acted on his words, no matter how extreme they may have been at times.

"I'm home," I declared my return as I entered the inn. I'd only been away for a few days, but being at home felt nostalgic. In front of the reception counter was a table for four. René, Moné, and Nakona were setting plates and wiping the table. The two little ones were already used to working at the inn.

"Oh, Dad," Nakona said, looking surprised to see me.

"Welcome back!" Moné smiled.

"Hi," René said awkwardly.

"Welcome home," Nakona added. "You're gonna stay the night?"

"Yeah. How's the inn doing?"

"Same as always," Nakona shrugged. "Or, well, I wish I could say that, but there's hardly any customers..."

"Oh, but, but!" Moné said excitedly. "I sold a lot of the medicine I made!"

"Oh! Is that right?!" I crouched down and patted her on the head. "Looks like you've got talent as an alchemical apothecary!"

When I first picked the twins up, Moné was a lot less talkative, but lately, she's started acting like I was her real father. Moné smiled happily as I patted her on the head, and seeing her smile put me at ease. It was such a relief to see she had regained her smile after all the trauma she and her brother had gone through.

I wish I could find their parents...

"How are you doing, René?" I asked the other twin.

"Oh, I'm used to work now. B-But, um..." he said, averting his gaze from me in a fidgety manner.

"What's up, buddy?" I looked at him curiously.

Mujimuji headbutted René's back softly, trying to cheer him on.

"I, erm..."

"Yes?"

"I want to become a jewel craftsman." René hung his head, refusing to meet my gaze.

"What?!"

A jewel craftsman?

"You mean...as in, the ones that grant magical effects to jewels and decorations to make magical accessories?" I asked.

"Yeah," René nodded.

"O-Oh... Well, that's a pretty ambitious dream to have, isn't it...? I mean, I'm not against it, but...why a jewel craftsman?"

I couldn't imagine how living in this inn would put the idea of being a jewel craftsman into the boy's head. With Moné, it made sense she'd want to be an alchemical apothecary because she was imitating Tina. But with René...did a jewel craftsman stay at the inn while I was away?

No, I think jewel craftsmen typically shut themselves off in their workshops and don't go outside... How did he learn about that job, then?

"Well, adventurers that come to the inn keep telling me about how their magical accessories make it easier to fight..." he mumbled.

"Oh... Ah, wait, that's it?"

"No, there's more. Remember that red stone I had buried in my forehead? Maybe it's because of that, but I can kind of tell what jewels are thinking."

"Huh?" I couldn't help but exclaim.

René still wouldn't look me in the eye, but it didn't seem like he was lying. I could tell that much. But that meant...

"Really? That's amazing," I said with a proud smile.



René looked up at me in surprise. My eyes met his, peering into a gaze full of anxiety and disbelief.

"I believe you," I assured him.

René's expression clouded over with emotion.

"See? We told you he'd believe you!" Moné said happily.

"Mujimuji!"

"...Yeah..."

That's the feeling I got.

I looked to Nakona, who confirmed it with a nod. René didn't think I'd believe him. And indeed, "understanding what jewels feel" was a little hard to believe. But still, one of the girls I raised was a Spherit Folk—a demi-human with a jewel as part of her body. And since René had that gemstone embedded into his forehead, it wasn't entirely unplausible for him to have some connection to gems.

If anything, him having that latent talent might have explained why Edesa Kura's people messed with his forehead, trying to make him look like a Spherit Folk.

Anyway, if that was the case, I could see how René would make for a decent jewel craftsman. In which case, I had no reason to stop him.

"That said, we'll have to make you a jewel crafting workshop next to Tina's workshop," I told him. "And before we even get that far, we'll need to send you to apprentice under someone..."

"Apprentice..." René repeated the word.

"That's right. Nakona and I don't know anything about crafting jewels. We can't teach you much about that," I said honestly.

If he wanted to be a craftsman, there was only so much he could learn on his own, and I didn't have the first idea what facilities and tools he'd need. The best option would be for him to apprentice under a jewel craftsman in one of the other countries, taking in the technique and knowledge he'd need.

"Let me think..." I closed my eyes, thinking of the different countries I was familiar with.

I knew one of René's goals was to find his parents. To that end, I figured De Marl might be a good fit. It was a large country, and I could pull strings for him. And on days off, he could try looking for his parents.

Except...

"René, I think you should either go to De Marl, or the dwarven

kingdom, Segyadis.”

“Th-The dwarven kingdom...?” he sputtered.

Those were the two options I offered. De Marl for the aforementioned reasons, but I also brought up the dwarven kingdom for René’s sake. Dwarves are master craftsmen. They made everything, from weapons to architecture to furniture and decorations—and everything they made was first class. Ledo could serve as my contact point with them. If René wanted to become a first-grade craftsman, De Marl or Segyadis seemed like the best places.

Of course, a human going to apprentice in the dwarven kingdom on the demi-human continent was unheard of. But I believed that René had talent, and if possible, I wanted him to nurture it as best he could.

But needless to say, it’d be a difficult road to tread regardless. He wouldn’t have time to look for his parents, and he’d have to live away from his sister, whom he promised to protect. And so, I left the choice in his hands. He could either take the safe option and apprentice at De Marl, or leave for Segyadis.

It was a difficult choice to make, that much was for certain.

“This is a hard decision, René,” I told him. “I want you to think it through and make your choice on your own. You can take your time, but keep in mind that the sooner you start your apprenticeship, the better. We still need to talk to Ledo.”

“R-Right.”

“And as for your parents, I’ll ask around for them, but I’m sure you want to look for them on your own, right?” I bent over and placed a hand on René’s head. “If so, you can do that by going to De Marl. Personally, I think De Marl is the safer place to go, since I know people there. But if you want Ledo to introduce you to a good teacher, you can go to his country instead. Whichever you choose, I have your back, kid. So you can pursue whatever path you want.”

“Ah...” René looked like he was on the verge of tears. “I...”

“Yeah?”

“I-I think I want to go to the dwarven kingdom.”

“I see. All right, then. I’ll talk things out with Ledo first. When I go to Segyadis next, I’ll look for a reliable craftsman to teach you.”

“Th-Thank you!”

René made his choice and decided to apprentice at the dwarven kingdom. I thought that was a fine idea. The boy deserved

the freedom to pick his own path. It wouldn't be an easy road to tread, but he would surely make it...

"I'm sure your parents are happy for you," I said. "We'll keep looking for them, so they can see how strong and reliable you've grown up to be."

"Yeah!"

"Good, then go to sleep for tonight. And don't rush things while we decide where you go, all right? If Giyaga has a book about jewel crafting, we can buy it from him. For now, just do whatever you can at the moment. And have your things packed so you're ready to leave for your training at any time."

"Right."

I tapped him on the shoulder, then on the back, and then patted his head, spurring him to take a bath. Moné didn't seem saddened by the news; instead, she grinned and rejoiced at her brother's unfolding future. They were only ten years old or so. Kids really do grow up fast. I felt the same way when I raised Tinaris, but kids really do mature faster than you realize. So much so that an old man like me would end up left all alone in no time...

I sighed as I watched René and Moné leave to take a bath. But then—

"Ow!"

I felt Nakona punch me in the back.

"Good going, Dad!" she grinned. "Why the long face, though? We should be celebrating. Little René decided on his future."

"Nah, decided his future? It's too early for that. He's still ten," I argued.

"I guess. But it's good he decided on something, you know? I've been worried about him."

"...Yeah, me too."

René was terribly emotional, and deeply determined to find his parents. I was afraid his determination might turn to obsession, and that he might devote his life to seeking revenge on Edesa Kura for what they did to his parents.

But René grew up to become a boy who could look ahead and consider his future and what he wanted to become. He wanted to be of use to others, to be someone people would thank and appreciate. Any man could admire the determination needed to stick to your path.

I, myself, couldn't do that. I may have climbed high, but my

sword and knight's spirits were all used up in the war. And so, I hoped René would pursue a path that helped people instead. I could only hope he'd stick to that path.

"Oh, and by the way," Nakona said.

"Hm?"

"I went on a date with Shida."

"Guh, nng?!" I choked.

"And we discussed what we'd do after we get married."

"Nnnnng?!"

After they get married?! They're talking about that already?! It's soon! Way too soon! Way, way too soon!

"We decided we'd take over the inn after we marry. Shida doesn't have a claim to the throne, after all, so we'll probably live together. I asked him if he doesn't want to keep being an adventurer, and he said that once he's done with his role as the Elf of the Sun, he might go adventuring with me. What do you want to do, Dad?"

"Huh? What do I want to do about what?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" she sighed. "I'm talking about Lico!"

"Agh!"

Licorice?! Oooh, she knows! Well, I did confess in public, so it makes sense she knows!

I was about as uncomfortable talking to my daughter about my love life as I was talking to her about her love life!

But maybe I should consult her about this. Nakona, Tina, René, and Moné would be affected by my choice. We might be becoming a new family...though Lico hasn't answered my feelings, yet.

"...W-Well, my mission isn't over yet. And Lico has House Avide to consider, not to mention that even if she retires as a knight captain, she's still a state alchemist."

"Hm, true, but still," Nakona said.

"Hm?"

"You could always just go back to De Marl, Dad."

I fell silent. It felt like Nakona's unexpected words made time grind to a halt. Or rather, it wasn't so much time that froze, but my mind. Going back to De Marl. My second homeland, which I thought I had no lingering attachments to.

"You can leave the inn to me, René, and Moné." Nakona sat in an empty chair and gestured for me to sit with her. "Tina won't be coming back from Deshmel for a while, but once I marry Shida, his

magic will make life here easier than ever. I think we'll manage even when René leaves to apprentice in the dwarven country."

I'm stunned. I didn't imagine Nakona would plan for the future so thoroughly. Still surprised, I sat next to Nakona, as prompted.

"Lico's a skilled alchemist, and I can't imagine De Marl is going to let her leave," she continued. "I can see her researching all sorts of tools and techniques in the future. And Lico belongs in De Marl, it's where her talents blossom the most. I like working at the inn, and living surrounded by nature suits me. And the occasional bandit attacks let me vent out my warrior instincts, you know?"

"Y-Yeah."

When she puts it like that, I kind of feel bad for the bandits. Not that bandits deserve pity.

"And you, Dad? I think you should be in De Marl, helping train the next generation of knights."

"M-Me?"

"Yep. I'm already grown up, and Tina's going to be an adult soon, too. Both your daughters are independent women now, you know?"

"Ah...!" I gasped.

"So I think you can start thinking about what you want to do with your own life now. Live wherever you want, be with the person you love, and do what makes you happy. But if you're going to choose Lico as your life partner, you should prioritize what she wants. After all, Mom caused her so much grief."

"Nakona..."

Her words rendered me speechless. As it turned out, that fact weighed on Nakona's heart heavier than it did on mine. And while I didn't feel like what happened between our exes made me in some way indebted to Lico, I did want to make her happy if I could. She was a good woman, after all.

"So I want you to follow Lico's wishes as much as possible, Dad. I think you'll be happier that way, too... Hey, Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll be happy, for sure. So I want you to be happy, too."

"Ngh..." I was overwhelmed by emotion. "Yeah..."

"Well! Not much we can do about the Sugula up there in the sky, so for all we know, we might not have a future to discuss... But Tina says Renge will do something about it. So I don't think talking about this is a waste of time," she said.

“Yeah, agreed.”

I have to keep going.

Nakona’s words filled my eyes with tears.

We have to keep doing our best to make sure we all end up happy.

♣Me at Age Sixteen – Part 2

“HOP!” I exclaimed as I flipped the pancake over the pan.

Good, it fried just right!

“So you’re turning seventeen next month, huh?” Nakona said. “Time really flies by... Ah, right, here’s the plate for the pancakes. Anyway, you want something for your birthday?”

“Thanks, Nakona. Hmm, a present, huh...? Nothing really comes to mind. With the greenhouse, I have all the plants I need growing. Oh, how are things going in Rofola, by the way?”

“You mean with Shida and René? You wouldn’t believe how crazy it’s been there...”

“R-Really...?”

Nakona was here on one of her periodic visits to Fort Deshmel, where she delivered vegetables and food from Rofola to us. Last year, Nakona got engaged, an act that came completely out of left field and left me quite baffled.

I mean, Nakona was at a marriageable age, so her getting engaged was, in and of itself, something to celebrate. The issue was the person she was marrying.

Shida, of all people... I shuddered at the thought.

“But he doesn’t really drop by to visit too often,” Nakona shrugged. “He’s a busy man, I guess...”

“Yeah... I mean, it makes sense given his job...” I replied.

Thinking back on it, it was only a year ago when Shida suddenly asked to marry Nakona. Nakona agreed on the condition that Shida help develop the automatic selling magic. It was actually a magic device that was being developed by Shida, Ledo, and Mister Giyaga, which drew on the Air spilling from the leylines. Needless to say, it was based on the vending machines from my past life.

I had the blueprints for the device made by explaining how it worked to Ledo, and Shida’s job was to come up with a magic circle or spell that would allow the device to tap into the leylines’ Air.

Thanks to their efforts, there were prototypes of this “magical vending machine” set up in Deshmel and Rofola. For the time

being, it was based on people writing order forms detailing what they needed, after which they inserted the payment, be it money or other tradable goods, into the device. Once I received the payment and order form, I sent the requested product back to the customer.

There were still issues with the system, though. Sometimes it took me a while to notice an order form, or order forms never got to me. Other times people put in their money first, only for the money to be sent away without an order form. Or sometimes, the amount required was too much to fit into the delivery box.

So, for the time being, we only had machines set up in Deshmel and Rofola, where we had people who could help with any issues, and laid out a list of suggested payments for specific goods. There were many aspects of it that still required improvement. It gave me renewed appreciation for vending machines in my past life.

This was why Nakona still had to periodically deliver vegetables and fruit from Rofola. Shida had “moved in” to the Rofola Lodge, where he occasionally worked with Ledo on improving the automatic selling device.

“Okay, so next up is—” I said.

“Huh? You’re making something else?” Nakona asked, surprised.

“Heheheh...” I cackled.

“Wh-What?”

Breakfast preparations were over, however! There was something I wanted to try making... No, something I had to make! And that was...!

“Wh-What’s that?” Nakona blinked in surprise. “A chunk of meat?”

“It’s Chashao!” I exclaimed.

“Cha...shao?”

Chashao was a type of roast pork. Making it was simple. One took long strips of boneless pork and marinated them in a mixture of onions, soy sauce, sugar, and sake for two hours and then fried it until it turned golden. It was also possible to fry it first and then boil it in the marinade pot, though one had to take care to place a lid. This was to ensure the aroma settled in.

And there was something else I made! Flavored boiled eggs! Making this was also very simple. One boiled the egg until it was half done, and then peeled off the shell and let it sit in the same marinade for the whole night. However, for this marinade, one

usually used a type of wine called Mirin instead, to achieve a refined, subtle sweetness rather than the more overwhelming sweetness of sugar. But in my case, I couldn't get my hands on any Mirin, so I had to resort to sugar.

I'll just add it to the list of things I should make someday!

And with those dishes prepared...

"I'm actually developing a type of noodles that aren't just pasta!" I told Nakona.

"Huh?"

"And this is the prototype!"

"Huh?" Nakona repeated, still not understanding what I meant.

"Anyway, with all this, the dish should be plenty edible, so I figured we could try it during breakfast."

"Yeah?"

True, even I had to admit that Chashao and pancakes were a weird combination. But I had been dying to make it after I had perfected my soy sauce recipe.

"Heheheheh..."

"Wh-What's gotten into you, Tina? You're scaring me here..."

"I'm looking forward to making it as we speak...!"

"O-Okay, good for you."

Noodles! I'm going to spend the day making noodles!

Now that I could make noodles, all I needed was to make soy sauce and chicken bone soup and use the Chashao and flavored egg as toppings! *And then, I will have done it... I will have created ramen!*

Hehehe, heheheheh...

This is what I've been working toward all this time, and what a long road it was! Especially when it came to processing the Dajiz beans! Creating soy sauce made me want to create more and more dishes. I kept getting sidetracked! I wanted to make miso, which inevitably made me want to make soy sauce!

But then I tried to make tofu! And soy milk! And then a tofu hamburger! And then bean curd lees! And a burger out of them too! Soymilk, and then soymilk donuts, and cookies, and a hot pot! Miso stir-fry! Miso marinade! Dajiz beans have changed my life!

And finally, the promised time was upon me! I was finally going to make miso ramen!

"But miso rice balls and miso fried rice balls are hard to give up on, too..." I mumbled to myself.

“What’s that now?” Nakona eyed me dubiously.

“O-Oh, nothing!”

I sat opposite Nakona and started eating.

Oh, this reminds me about the rice...!

Deshmel’s warm, relatively dry climate meant the region wasn’t suitable for growing rice. Rofola had far better terrain for that. But I couldn’t even find rice plants in this world to begin with. I could only hope they existed, somewhere...

“Ah, that reminds me,” Nakona said.

“What’s up?”

“Moné said she wanted to come and stay the night here. Do you mind if I bring her over next time? She wants you to teach her about alchemy.”

“Moné said that?!”

I almost squeed; that was how cute she was. We only saw each other once a year recently, but she actually wanted to spend time with me! Oh, how could I say no?

“I don’t mind, but what about the inn?” I asked.

“Well, most of our guests recently have been soldiers from the demi-human continent,” Nakona replied.

“...I see,” I said, putting my fork down.

The battle to capture Edesa Kura was fast approaching.

Many of the demi-human continent’s races were deploying their soldiers, while many of the human continent’s countries sent out their knights to form an alliance. This wasn’t the first time such an alliance was formed. Sixty years ago, there were other clashes between Edesa Kura and the human and demi-human alliance.

But this time, there was a new factor that made everything that much harder—the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own. It could attach itself to people through mere contact, and this was something that weighed heavily on Renge and the other Mythicals.

The demi-humans worshipped the Holy Woman, so the possibility of them being taken over was slim, but the issue was the human knights. They outnumbered the demi-humans, and their faith in the Holy Woman was shaky. A year or two of attempting to convince them wasn’t enough time to change that, it seemed.

But there was something that made me worry all the more.

“That aside, I hope Dad is okay...” I voiced my concerns.

“He said he’d propose to Lico again after everything’s over, but...you know Dad,” Nakona shrugged.

Last year, Dad had proposed to Lico in a drunken stupor. Lico said she'd quit the knights once this war was over. Given her age, she could still serve as an active knight, but she'd decided she could leave things in the hands of her juniors.

The last time Lico was in Deshmel, we were discussing her future plans when she said "There's Marcus to consider, too" with a flushed face, so I figured maybe he does have a chance! She was seriously considering a future with Dad. And now that Dad knew that, he wanted to propose properly, when he was sober.

But like Nakona said, this was our Dad we were talking about. He was even more awkward when it came to romance than Nakona was, so I couldn't help but worry.

"Thanks for breakfast!" I said. "Now, let's get down to business."

"You're pretty fired-up today," Nakona noted. "You said you'll be making noodles that aren't pasta?"

"Yep!"

With breakfast done, I washed the dishes with Nakona, put them away, and prepared some wheat flour, salt, and water. Even back when I used to cook during my shut-in phase, I never really made noodles by hand, so I wanted to try this first. I had the feeling making noodles wasn't too different from pasta, but did one need something else for ramen noodles?

"It's not pasta, so you're not using olive oil?" Nakona asked.

"That's right. I'll just go with trial and error this time. If it doesn't work, I'll just adjust the egg and flour until it does."

"Wow. So you already have an idea of what the flavor will be? That's impressive."

"Hm, not really..."

I just couldn't let go of the taste of ramen from my past life. It was very much a comfort food for me, and I got a craving for it every so often!

Speaking of comfort food, I'd really like some sushi right now... and maybe oden? Udon and soba...but you need buckwheat flour for soba, and I'm not sure that exists in this world.

But with rice, sushi was a possibility. If I could just get my hands on some rice...!

"Aaah!" I kneaded the dough vigorously.

"You want me to knead it for you?" Nakona asked.

“Haa, phew... Could you?”

“Sure.”

“That’s a huge help! Kneading takes so much energy...”

I always had Dad and Nakona help me make the dough for pasta. It was hard labor, but both of them were amazing for being able to pull it off!

“This good?” Nakona asked.

“Yeah.”

She stretched it out thinly, and I started cutting the noodles. I was trying to make wavy noodles, but as I cut them, they ended up being straight. But for the purposes of this attempt, these noodles would do.

“Will you try it when I’m finished?” I asked.

“Yeah, sure,” Nakona said with a smile.

“All right, then let’s get cooking!”

I started with the soup. I mixed soy sauce into the chicken broth and added soup stock to adjust the flavor. I drained the water from the steamed noodles, put them in a bowl, and added the soup. I then put in the flavored egg and chashao, and voila! I put a small portion aside so I could try it.

“T-Tina, I said I’d test it, but this is a bit too much to eat right after breakfast.”

“Oh, sorry!”

Did I make too much? Oh well, let’s try it!

“It’s good!” Nakona said.

“But hard!” I complained.

“What is this? It tastes funny. What’s this black fluid you made?” Nakona asked.

“You mean the soy sauce? Anyway, the soup’s not bad, but the noodles are too hard! I guess they’re too straight and don’t absorb enough of the broth. It just doesn’t taste right!”

“Always the perfectionist, aren’t you?” Nakona laughed wryly.

I didn’t expect it to come out perfect the first time, but still! What’s the secret to making curly noodles?! Aaaah, time to make it over again from scratch!



“UGH, my stomach...” Nakona groaned.

“S-Sorry...”

After that, I tried to make ramen five more times. It still wasn't quite what I wanted, meaning it would require a lot more trial and error. Nakona sampled every dish, resulting in her getting a tummy ache.

I'm jealous! If I ate that much, I'd get chubby in no time.

“You don't feel bad about this at all!” Nakona chided me. “Grr, I'm going back to Rofola!”

“F-Fine, fine! Thanks for everything!”

Nakona woke Sisiol the fenrir, who was asleep near the dining hall door, and had him teleport her back to Rofola.

Maybe I did make her taste test too much for me... Hehe.

Her skill for making noodles was simply too good, after all.

“Now then...”

Her skill was so good, in fact, I had a lot of noodles left over. I ran out of soup, so I'd need to make more of that, but I'd imagine if all we ate was soy-sauce-flavored ramen, we'd just get sick of it eventually.

Maybe I should try miso ramen? But with noodles like this, I won't be able to make the perfect miso ramen...

“What are you up to, Tina?” a voice pulled me out of my thoughts as I cleaned up the dining hall and pondered what to do with the mound of noodles I had left.

“Oh, Renge. Hi.”

Oh, here's an idea. I'll have Renge help me make the ideal noodles next time! After all, if I ask Revireus, he'll just gobble up the batter...

But for now, I needed to get rid of the extra noodles I made. That was the problem at hand.

“Hmm, leftovers from another culinary experiment, huh?” Renge observed. “I'm always impressed by how devoted you are to improving when it comes to cooking.”

“D-Does it come across that way...?” I asked.

I'm just trying to replicate the flavors of my past life...

But being complimented by Renge felt very nice. I couldn't see if he was smiling under the scarf he was wearing, but his eyes had a gentleness to them.

...I really can't thank this scarf of his enough. Thank you for protecting my maidenly heart.

I felt like if Renge was looking at me with his face unhidden, I'd just end up falling in love with him even harder. I'd be too

embarrassed to talk to him, my heart would beat like crazy, and I'd just be too elated to think straight...

Now that would be troublesome. I couldn't afford to fall in love with him, or the stone in my forehead would become a Stone of Daybreak...

Aaah, why did I have to be a Spirit Folk? But then again, it's because I'm a Spherit Folk that Renge's with me right now... If only it wasn't for the Stone of Daybreak...

For a moment, I paused in thought. A stone that can grant any one wish. My wish was to become a skilled, successful alchemical apothecary. And I wanted to make that wish a reality through effort! But I did consider it, every so often...the possibility of Renge and me loving each other...

If that happened, the Spherit Stone in my forehead would become a Stone of Daybreak...but then again, I didn't want to rely on a wish from a stone to make my relationship with Renge a reality!

There was the possibility of using the stone to wish for the Sugula to disappear, but according to Renge, even if I was to ask for that, the wish wouldn't be granted in a "Proper manner."

Grr... For a stone that grants wishes, the Stone of Daybreak is pretty finicky...

"Oh, by the way, here." Renge handed me something. "The water from Levinos Spring you asked for."

"Oh, thanks!" I said excitedly.

"What are you going to use it for?"

"To develop a supreme tonic, of course!"

"I see..."

Renge gave me a bottle of water from the Levinos Spring. The spring was the Mythical continent's hallowed ground and the King of Myths' residence. It was full of high-purity, high-grade Air. And besides that, I had the Eve flowers Grandma Elysis gave me. I had Ledo build a greenhouse for me in Fort Deshmel, where I had successfully cultivated them.

Last year, when Edesa Kura attacked, they unleashed monsters that wrecked some of the fort's walls and barns. Back then, I was prepared to find the greenhouse in ruins...but thankfully, it was untouched.

Monsters are instinctively drawn to where people gather, and owing to that, the greenhouse was spared. But that incident made

me anxious for the greenhouse's safety, and I had another one made on the fort's fourth floor.

And having transferred all my precious herbs there, I was able to speed up their cultivation and finally made the Eve flowers bloom! And with them, I had all the ingredients necessary for the tonic.

The Eve flower was said to have the genes of three other flowers: the Solan, Duana, and Lilith. By mixing this flower in the Levinos Spring water, transmuting a supreme tonic should be possible. Doing what no one before me could and perfecting a recipe for a supreme tonic should have been possible!

True, I did have the Stella's power now, and it allowed me to regrow Dad's missing right arm. But that didn't mean I wasn't going to push the envelope as an alchemical apothecary anyway! I wanted to leave my mark on the human continent as Tinaris, the alchemical apothecary!

And that...will be how I repay Grandma for everything!

"But Tina, you've already made medicine like that before, right?" Renge pointed out.

"You mean the high-grade tonic +5? Well, the process of making that is special."

"You mean the fact you used holy magic," he guessed.

"Yes!"

When I made the high-grade tonic +5, I added holy magic to the mana I mixed into it. Holy magic was an element most humans couldn't use to begin with, and to top it off, with how degraded and polluted the Air in this continent was, very few people could use magic at all. And as far as I knew, there weren't other people who practiced alchemical apothecary and magic at the same time.

That makes the high-grade tonic +5 a recipe only I can make.

The +5-recovery effect made the high-grade tonic's effects close to that of a supreme tonic, but the fact an ordinary alchemical apothecary couldn't make that recipe meant it wasn't a truly established recipe. An established recipe was one anyone could replicate. In the world of alchemical apothecaries, a recipe was only considered real if everyone could make it. If only one alchemical apothecary in the world could pull off this recipe, it couldn't be passed down.

But, put another way, having an original recipe only I could make under my belt was a privilege. There were other alchemical

apothecaries with personal recipes, and they were all state alchemical apothecaries. Grandma had her recipe for the cure for the Rotten Egg Stone Disease, while Lico had her high-density Air Gun.

But still...

"I'm not a citizen of any country, so I can't become a state alchemist. And I don't want to become one, anyway," I said truthfully. "Besides, having an original recipe that's hard to gather ingredients for become common knowledge would honestly just be trouble for me. Imagine if everyone started flooding me with orders for it."

"What about the mana restorative?" Renge asked.

"If I make too much of that, people might find out what race I am."

"Really?"

I'm really worried about that, geez!

But if I could establish a recipe for the as-of-yet undiscovered supreme tonic, I'd become a famous alchemical apothecary that stands on equal footing with Grandma Elysis!

I...think! So just watch me, Grandma! I'll become famous around the human continent as Tinaris, the alchemical apothecary!

Once the war ends, I won't have to worry about Edesa Kura coming after me. And to begin with, I'm being protected by the Mythicals, so if anyone does come after me, they'll have to go through Renge...

A sudden realization made me fall silent.

"Hm? Tina? Something wrong?" Renge looked at me, confused.

Oh, goodness, what am I thinking? I let this whole situation go to my head...

My thoughts almost made it seem like Renge protecting me was a given for the rest of my life. I placed my hands over my cheeks, feeling my face go hot and red with embarrassment.

"What's wrong?" Renge asked me again.

"Hiyah, ah, hm, nothing!"

"But your face is all red. If you're feeling sick, you can rest," Renge said, leaning in to peer closely at me.

"No, really, I'm fine," I answered hurriedly, slurring my words. *No good, I've got to be careful...*

I couldn't help but get embarrassed with Renge peering into

my face like that! I wouldn't even be able to talk to him properly. When he looked at me with his brows furrowed like that, I could feel steam about to erupt from my ears...

"I-I was just thinking that I'm starting to take you protecting me for granted, is all..." I replied sheepishly.

"Huh?" Renge looked at me, baffled.

"S-Sorry!"

No good, my head's all hot. I feel like I'm going to let out steam...! Why did I say that, gosh!

"Why are you apologizing? If you see me as your protector, I'm glad," Renge said.

"Ah..." I gasped.

"I always thought I'm only good for destroying things. But if you see me as someone who protects you, I'm happy to hear it."

"Ah, erm..."

I could only see his eyes, but he seemed to be smiling softly.

Ah, ahaaa! Oooh, this is bad! Even with the fluffy scarf on, I can't look at him! Renge's too handsome today!

"Saaaaay, Jiril, what are we watching exaaaaactly?" Mirage, who was in the room the whole time, asked.

"Don't think too hard about it, Mirage, hm," Jiril replied dryly.



THE day after Nakona had dropped by and helped me make noodles, I was working in the alchemical workshop adjacent to my room at the fort. I had Ledo expand and design it for me last year. As for my workshop in Rofola, I planned to lend it to Moné, who was becoming a fledging alchemical apothecary. But before I could do that, I'd need to teach her some more basic recipes.

The first recipes that came to mind were the low-grade tonic, antipyretic, and antidote. All of those could be made from wildflowers obtainable around Rofola.

Oh, but I can't believe little Moné wants to become an alchemical apothecary like me! She's so cute! But come to think of it, I haven't seen Moné and René for a long time. I haven't returned to Rofola in three years.

I couldn't leave Deshmel because of the monster-attracting barrier, which made monsters charge toward the fort every day.

I bet the lodge hasn't changed much... I wish I could go visit Rofola sometime and take a deep breath of that clean air. And maybe take a dip in the hot spring at the mountain...

"Heave, ho..."

I prepared the pot I'd just finished washing as thoughts of home swirled through my head. It was a black iron pot with a deep bottom. I poured in the Levinos Spring water Renge had brought me, and then picked a few Eve flowers to add to the pot. As simple as the recipe was, the water and flowers used were very special, so producing a supreme tonic with just this should have been possible.

Will it work, though?! Let's see!

I spun and spun my large wooden ladle, churning the concoction vigorously as I added in mana. That said, the ingredients weren't mixing as well as I wanted.

Oh, right... The Levinos Spring water has much purer Air, so the usual amount of mana I use for potion-making is insufficient...

Still, mana was absolutely necessary for "Binding" the different ingredients together.

I guess my only option is to add as much mana as I can until they mix, then.

This was shaping up to be a harder task than I had originally planned.

I churned, and churned, and churned.

At one point, I realized I'd spent more time churning this potion than I did when making powders, but there was still no sign of the ingredients properly melting together.

But I can't give up. I'll make them mix together, for sure!

So I churned, and churned, and churned, and churned some more, until—

Pop!

"Ah!"

It lit up! I did it! It took me three hours of pouring in mana, but they mixed together!

I hurriedly wrote down the results in my recipe notepad and sighed. I was really tired.

"Now let's see how it came out... Mm? Huuuuh?"

Inside the pot was a faint blue liquid. It was a very clear, pretty color, but...

What is this?

When I accidentally made a supreme tonic once, it was a faint

pink liquid that glittered like it was full of gold dust.

W-Well, that doesn't necessarily mean this is a failure. The time has come!

"Appraisal!" I activated my appraisal magic, praying that it said this was a supreme tonic. "What the?"

The Information I saw said thus:

"Saint Elixir. Quality: Average.

Description: Fully heals all manner of illness and injury and restores all stamina. When fed to a living creature, it can give them sentience, and when poured upon certain beings, it can give them life."

"...I think I just created something really dangerous," I said darkly.

What am I supposed to do with this...thing?



"A Saint Elixir?! You actually made a Saint Elixir?!" Renge cried.

"Yeah... One way or another..." I mumbled.

"One way or anooooooooother?! The Saint Elixir is the stuff of legeeeends!" Mirage stressed.

"I-Is it really that big of a deal?" I asked, fidgeting under their wide-eyed stares.

That evening, I went to the dining hall with the Saint Elixir to ask the Mythicals for advice about it. I approached Renge, Jiril, and Mirage as they were having dinner and showed them what I had made that morning, earning me this reaction.

Eep, I guess I really made something crazy this time...

"So, how dangerous is this thing?" I asked.

"Well, you know about the elixir of life?" Renge answered me with a question.

"Hm, you mean the potion that gives life? Makes you immortal or something? The one Saint Keria Veraj made for his wife?" I guessed.

The world's first known alchemist was Keria Veraj. Legends said he'd made an elixir of life graced with the Stella's power, but his wife refused to take it and chose to pass on instead. With his wife having refused the potion, Keria Veraj threw it away into a well, and disposed of all evidence of how to make it as well.

"Saint Keria Veraj? No, Uncle Keria was a commoner, so he

never had a last name. He wasn't a saint either. Also, he didn't make the potion for his wife, but his sister," Renge corrected.

"Uncle...? Whose?" I asked, not keeping up.

"Yes, he was *my* uncle."

"Huh?! K-Keria Veraj was your...?!"

"He was Akari's younger brother. That's probably where the part about the Stella's blessing came from. But yes, he was definitely what you'd call an alchemical apothecary nowadays. When Mother fell ill, he successfully made an elixir of life for her, but she never accepted it."

Mother?! He didn't make it for his wife?! And he's Renge's uncle?! The one Renge told me about a few months ago?!

"W-Wait! So if Keria is your uncle, does that mean, huh? Does this mean Akari is your...so he's your...?!" I sputtered.

"He's my uncle, yes."

"B-But you said Keria was Akari's younger brother..."

"Eh? Yes. Didn't I mention it before? Akari was my mother. The Holy Woman Akari-Berz. So that makes Keria my uncle," Renge said nonchalantly.

I became speechless. He just dropped this bombshell like it was nothing...!

"Huuuuuh?!" I shouted.

"What, did I really forget to tell you? Sorry," he apologized.

"It's a very well-known story among Mythicals, hm," Jiril said.

"But we haaaaaave the opposite opinion when it coooooomes to our opinion of him," Mirage appended.

Their opinion of him? Of Keria? No, forget that. So the reason the Akari I met when I got the power of the Stella was so worried about Renge was because he was her son?!

I felt relief wash over me. They really did have a special relationship, but it wasn't romantic...

Wait, that's not what matters here! Akari was Keria Veraj's sister?! No way!

"My uncle could tell Mother was on the brink of death," Renge continued. "But he wanted my father to stay on Wisty Air. He was also concerned about me since I was little, and he knew the monsters were still at large. So he believed Mother mustn't die, and desperately tried to make the elixir of life to keep her with us. But even when he made it, Mother knew that my father and me have a semipermanent lifespan, and she said she wanted to teach me that

life can and does end. And so, she rejected the elixir.”

I held my tongue. I still didn’t agree with her decision despite knowing his mother was Akari.

“My uncle understood and respected her wishes, and that’s why he discarded the elixir on the peak of Mount Rofola,” Renge went on. “And the Saint Elixir was a potion created in the process of creating the elixir of life. The Dwarf Inside the Bottle... The Kaguya with a Will of Its Own absorbed the Saint Elixir and turned it into Kathra. At first, my uncle didn’t realize that what was filling the bottle was pure Kathra, nor did he realize that what was born inside it was the Kaguya with a Will of its Own. He couldn’t have known that, because the Kaguya didn’t exist yet.”

“Wait, so you’re saying...this potion...” I hesitated.

“I think it’ll be fine so long as you hold onto it, Tina,” Renge told me. “My uncle didn’t realize that the bottle was full of Kathra, and when he poured the Saint Elixir into it, he gave life to the Kaguya with a Will of its Own. But you have the Stella, which naturally purifies all the Camilla, Kathra, and Kaguya in your vicinity. Besides, you put Stella inside the elixir, too.”

“I-I see...”

So it was safest when it was with me.

But was that what it meant when it said “When fed to a living creature, it can give them sentience, and when poured upon certain beings, it can give them life.”

This also meant I couldn’t carelessly dispose of this concoction, either. I was shocked to hear Keria had poured the elixir into a bottle without realizing it was polluted with Kathra! How can you make that kind of mistake?!

“To begin with, its original use is for curing diseases and injuries,” Renge said.

“R-Right,” I nodded.

Keria only got its application slightly wrong, and it resulted in catastrophic consequences... It made sense the Mythicals had such a poor opinion of him.

With that settled, I made to go to the kitchen to get myself something to eat, but then Renge’s expression suddenly hardened.

“Oh?” Mirage’s eyes widened.

“Ah!” Jiril clasped her hands over her mouth.

“What is it?” I asked, confused by their strong reactions.

They were probably using telepathy magic. This magic allowed

the Mythicals to communicate with each other regardless of distance. The fact they could do that without having to rely on smartphones was something I envied a little, but apparently, using this magic was difficult, and mastering it took a bit of getting used to. Shida could use it effortlessly, though. I still needed some training to use it, and it apparently required an abundance of mana.

The fact everyone's expression hardened like this implied something bad had happened. But since I couldn't use telepathy, the most I could guess was that the Mythicals heard something terrible enough to draw out this kind of reaction from them. Was I useless in this situation?

The three Mythicals exchanged concerned glances and hung their heads gravely.

"Renge?" I asked. "Did something happen?"

"O-Oh, well, yes..." he stammered. "It seems Curalius can no longer maintain consciousness."

"Ah!" I gasped, clasping my hands over my mouth.

So that means...!

Over the last few years, Curalius, the king of the Mythicals, was growing physically feeble and had to spend most of her time asleep. Curalius had said that she wasn't long for this world. *So that time has finally come...*

"You three should go to her side," I said.

"...!"

"Holy Woman..."

"..."

"I'll be fine inside the walls," I told them. "It's Curalius's final moments, right? Go on. Be with her."

"But..." Renge started.

"You won't have another chance, Renge!" I chided Renge, grabbing his arm.

Renge just said so himself. Life can and does end. As sad as that might be, it's true. So if he's going to see someone dear to him off, he should do it properly. Otherwise, he'd regret it for the rest of his days.

"Tina..." Renge muttered.

"Renge!" Revireus approached us with loud, boisterous footsteps. There were tears in his eyes. "Mother is...!"



Oh yeah, King Curalius is Revireus's mother...

But as Revireus approached the table...

"Ah...! That potion!" he exclaimed.

"Huh?"

He noticed the Saint Elixir on the table and quickly Appraised it.

"Give me that!" he demanded. "If we have Mother drink this, she might just...!"

"Are you sure that's smart?!" I called out, surprised.

He swiftly grabbed the Saint Elixir and teleported away.

I can't believe it!

"Oh no, Renge! Did you see that?" I asked him.

"Y-Yeah! This is trouble! Stupid Revi, he's thinking of having Curalius drink the Saint Elixir!"

"No, not that!" I said enthusiastically. "He picked up the bottle without breaking it! This is great progress!"

Revireus, that whirlwind of destruction, actually managed to pick up a fragile glass bottle without breaking it! He finally learned to control his strength!

"That's what's got you so excited?!" Renge shot back.

"B-But she's right, hm," Jiril said.

"She's right, yeeees," Mirage appended.

"I-I mean, I guess you're right, now that you mention it, but still..." Renge said, his tense attitude wavering.

Congratulations, Revireus! I'm sure your mother will be so proud of you!

But then my thoughts ground to a halt. I started asking myself why Revireus took the Saint Elixir.

"Say, Renge, why did he take the elixir?" I asked.

"Now you ask me that...?" he sighed. "He probably wants to have Curalius drink it. The Saint Elixir's potent effects might be enough to prolong her lifespan by a few more years."

"Wow! That potion can do that?!" I was stunned.

"Y-Yes, it's really that potent... You didn't know?" He raised an eyebrow at me.

"Hahaha, no..." I laughed dryly.

I mean, how could I imagine it could do such miraculous things, you know? And it was my first time making that potion, too.

"But King Curalius..." I muttered.

“Yes, I don’t think she wants thaaaaat,” Mirage said.

“But I can relate to Master Revi’s feelings very much, hm...” Jiril said sadly.

“Yes, agreed...” Renge nodded.

I could only hang my head in silence. When I saw Curalius last year, she said she had lived long enough and completed all her duties. She seemed satisfied with what she’d achieved. But I also understood how Revireus felt, too. If there was a way to keep your loved one with you longer, wouldn’t you want to try it? It was like the whole situation with Akari and her brother all over again.

But would Curalius feel the same way as Akari? We all knew how Revireus and the Mythicals felt, but would she willingly drink this elixir? Personally, I preferred to see this potion I concocted get put to use. And leaving it unused under my supervision felt like asking for trouble, so if there was a good way of using it up, I was all for it!

“Ah, but enough of this, you guys should hurry and go, too!” I urged them.

“But Holy Woman, our role is to protect this fortress and you, hm!” Jiril argued.

“I’ll be fine!” I implored them. “Listen, Jiril, I actually want to bid her farewell, too.”

“Ah...”

“But I can’t leave this fort, can I?” I said sadly. “So go in my place, too! Please! Let her know how much I wish I could be with her right now. Can’t you do that for me?”

“Holy Woman...” Mirage muttered.

The three Mythicals charged with my protection exchanged silent glances. They knew they needed to prioritize my protection, but if they didn’t see someone that dear to them off one last time, they’d always regret it. And I knew that, which was why...

“Go on. I’ll keep the world safe, so bid her farewell for me, too,” I said with a watery smile.

“Oooh, Holy Woman,” Mirage looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“Thank you, hm,” Jiril said.

“We’ll be back soon,” Renge said.

“Yeah, I’ll be waiting!”

I saw the three of them off, hoping they’d be there in time to see Curalius one last time.

Oh, but Revireus took the Saint Elixir I made to her... Is that going to be all right? I'm super worried...



THE next day, I woke up very early in the morning. I walked around the ramparts, purifying the monsters that swarmed outside the walls. The walls were damaged last year, but with Ledo's dwarven construction techniques and Shida's magic, we were able to fix and reinforce them.

I helped with the repairs, too. Ledo taught me a recipe for something called firm ironstone, which we then used to strengthen the walls!

That was when I learned that alchemy could be used to produce metals. I was quite impressed by the dwarven techniques and knowledge. Magic was the norm on the demi-human continent, so alchemy wasn't employed there. But maybe alchemy could fill the role of the metal fusion magic Ledo used! Both used mana, after all.

Having to make such large amounts of firm ironstone for the repair work was taxing, though. But maybe I could transmute a stone like when I made tonics, and make a stone with a healing tonic's effects!

But then I reconsidered that thought. It'd produce something similar to a Spherit Stone. And if I did that, creating something only the Spherit Folk could make, it would end up revealing that I was a surviving Spherit Folk.

And that's a no! No, no, no! Even without that, people have already started asking questions about me when word got out about the mana restorative!

Could I really go on like this, though? After all, I could probably make things only a Spherit Folk could...like a Spherit Stone. And Edesa Kura wanted the Spherit Stones all to themselves, so they went for outrageous prices, making it almost impossible for most people to get them.

So if I could make Spherit Stones, it'd be a huge help for magicians like Mina.

I made the mana restorative, so I could probably make a Spherit Stone if I tried. Should I, though?

One idea I had was to make lots of them and then say I

discovered them inside Fort Deshmel. If I said Edesa Kura had a cache of them in their fort, people wouldn't suspect I made them. And I could say I'd look for more caches, and use that excuse again when I made more Spherit Stones.

That's a great idea! Okay, let's make some Spherit Stones!

"Ah, there she is. Holy Woman!" I heard a voice call out to me.

"Y-Yes!" I replied. "Are there monsters coming?"

"No, the De Marl knight scheduled patrol unit came in!"

"All right, I'll be right over!"

Who'll be coming this time, I wonder?

The scheduled patrol unit was called that by name only. They guarded traveling caravans and lured monsters around the countries over to Deshmel for purification. And one other mission they had was to check up on me and report back on my activities. However, since they didn't want to arouse my suspicion, they mostly sent knights acquainted with me, Dad, and Nakona, like Lys, Gawain, Vector, Michael, and Kunon.

They were all high-ranking officers that commanded their own units. Dad was the former vice-captain of De Marl's Azure Knights, so they all agreed that reporting about me to De Marl was needless trouble for them. They said they'd report I was mostly fine, and that they could relay anything else I had to report.

Of course, they told me that out of earshot of anyone who might cause us trouble if they knew.

"Hm, let's see..."

I was called to the first floor by the person in charge of cleaning the fort, where I was met with a unit of five knights in white armor and capes. This was my first time seeing people from the Ivory Knights here. The Ivory Knights were elites meant to protect De Marl's internal affairs. What were people like them doing outside their country?

"Hey, remember me?" one of the knights said. "We've met once before."

"E-Erm..." I sort of remembered him, but couldn't quite recall his name.

"I-I guess you don't..." The man scratched his cheek awkwardly. "Well, the name's Gibson."

"I, er, I see..." I said awkwardly.

"And this over here is Russon, the commander of our unit."

"Hello..." I said.

"You really don't remember me, huh?"

"I-I'm sorry..." I really couldn't remember where I had met him before. It made me feel guilty.

"We met when you were little—outside De Marl's walls. Remember, when you made the fertilizer?"

"Huh? O-Oh, that! Yes, I remember that time," I said.

It was the first time Dad took me to De Marl. I think I was twelve at the time?

"This is my first time seeing the Ivory Knights here," I mentioned. "The Azure or Crimson Knights would always be the ones to come over. Did something happen?"

I was getting concerned that there might have been some issue with De Marl's internal affairs. De Marl, like most of the human continent's countries, had deep-rooted belief in its state religion. I wished they could turn their faith toward worshipping Akari... although, with me being the current Holy Woman, it would mean worshipping me, too.

I know I should get used to this, but I just can't quite stomach the idea and learn to accept it... I shuddered at the thought.

"Yes, actually, there's an expedition army that's marching for Deshmel right now. Our unit went ahead to report on it. We need to confirm there are enough rations and the like..." Gibson explained.

"We heard the fort is capable of garrisoning a large force, but we need to check that too," another knight chimed in. "Also, this fort is bound to be a foothold for subjugating Edesa Kura. The civilians here will have to choose to either evacuate or join the fight."

My eyes widened in disbelief. This matter had been up in the air for some time now, but it seemed the time had finally come for the fort to be used for warfare.

"The army should arrive in about a month," the other knight carried on. "After that, the entire united army should arrive. We are one unit that's been sent ahead to ensure the preparations are underway."

"I-I see."

But we were at our weakest right now. Dad, Renge, Revireus, Jiril, and Mirage were all away. I didn't know how to handle any of this war stuff.

"Where can we find Marcus or the Mythicals in charge of this fort?" Russon asked.

"I-I'm sorry. They're all away at the moment."

"Away?!" the knights exclaimed.

Whoa, that really took them by surprise!

But it made sense they couldn't anticipate that. Based on what I knew of Dad's schedule, he should be in the demi-human continent's kobold domain this week, where he got caught up in the kobold's unification feud or something...

He had Eure, who insisted on remaining an onlooker if possible, and a tired Shinsen with him, so I could only hope things wouldn't get too messy.

The knights all exchanged concerned glances.

"Sir Marcus aside, what about the Mythicals?" one of them asked.

"The ruler of the Mythicals is currently ill, so they went to the Mythical continent to watch over her," I explained, not sure how much detail to go into with people from De Marl. "I wanted to go too, but since I can't be away from Deshmel, I had them go in my place."

They had to attend their ruler's final moments, after all, and they wouldn't leave until I pushed them. They didn't say it, but I could tell they really wanted to see her off. And Renge did say that he'd be back by tomorrow morning no matter what, so I figured he'd be back sooner rather than later.

While he was a little overprotective of me, I was happy he wanted to protect me. And there was also the matter of Revireus taking the Saint Elixir I made.

What happened with that? Did his mother agree to drink it? Or maybe Revi ended up holding it too hard and shattered it... I can see him doing that.

"The Mythicals are away too, huh..." Russon muttered.

"Yes, so if you could just wait until they come back? I'm sure Renge... I mean, the Mythical ruler's proxy will be returning soon, so you won't have to wait long. Why don't you rest inside the fort? We'll make you a light meal and something sweet!"

Like back in Rofola!

I got the idea that once Edesa Kura and the Sugula were dealt with, we could turn Deshmel into a former-fortress-turned-hotel, making it into another highway inn that would ease the life of travelers. And we could have the people who handled the crops and livestock work there too, so that way they didn't have to uproot

their lives once everything was over...

I'm so keen on that plan! The Sugula is still blotting out the sun, but someday, when the Stella purifies enough of the world... I'm sure it'll eventually get smaller, making this plan a reality!

"Y-Yes, that sounds good, of course..." Russon muttered. "We'd like to rest, of course. But...there's a very pressing matter we need to discuss with you first."

"Yes?" I cocked my head to the side.

Russon looked a bit bothered with his eyes darting back and forth, and the way he spoke felt oddly evasive. Seeing this, Gibson pointed at the gate. "W-We'd heard some of the Mythicals were capable of teleportation and were hoping one of them could spare the time to transport some of our injured back to De Marl... We got attacked by monsters on our way here. If the Mythicals aren't available, we were hoping you could use your incredible apothecary skills to save them instead... Could you come out with us to treat them?"

"Oh?" I asked. "Then how about we bring them to the fortress, and I'll do it here—"

"No!" he insisted, cutting me off. "Some are so badly injured they may not survive the trip. ...And this is a rare chance for us to see your alchemical skills from up close! Won't you help us? Please?"

"Yes, I want to see you work, too!" another knight said.

"Please help us!" a third one chimed in.

"We've just been guarding important people in De Marl all this time, so we were not prepared when we came under attack. If there is anything you can do to help our injured, please do it before it's too late!" he pleaded, bowing his head desperately.

"That's right!"

"As you can see, we all want to see you work your magic," Gibson said. "Please, Tinaris. If it gets dangerous, we'll sacrifice our lives to get you back in the fortress."

"U-Um, I'm not sure about this..." I hesitated.

I was torn over what to do. I promised Renge and the Mythicals I wouldn't leave the fort, but I could relate to how the Ivory Knights must have felt if their injured were at death's door and they wanted me to treat them as soon as possible.

Oh, fine, I'll just do it! All I have to do is bring some of my potions and I might be able to save them! If they insist on me going in person, I'll

just think of it as me doing them a solid.

"Fine, just this once," I gave in and followed them outside of the walls to see how serious the injuries were. Hopefully, my potions would help them enough to get back into the fort.

"Woohoo!" a knight cheered. "The Holy Woman is as gracious as the rumors say!"

"N-No, I'm not a Holy Woman, I'm an alchemical apothecary!" I corrected.

Having the people working at Deshmel call me that was an inevitability, and they wouldn't stop using that name even if I insisted on it. But I felt that with outsiders, I should put my foot down and let them know I was an alchemical apothecary first and foremost!

I mean, I'm good at alchemy! Why is everyone so focused on the Stella and the Holy Woman thing instead?! One is my actual talent, while the other is more of a given skill!

It frustrated me, which was why I had the mana restoratives I made shipped out for sale, albeit with their recipe undisclosed. I hoped that, in so doing, people around the world might start talking about how the alchemical apothecary Tinaris developed a mana restorative. That way, alchemical apothecaries might start worshipping me instead...

I don't want to be worshipped or anything. That'd be no different from the way things are now... But I do want to be respected for my craft!!

The mana restorative had plenty of uses. Alchemy required mana, so the restoratives allowed alchemists who weren't skilled with the mana recovery technique to transmute recipes they couldn't manage until now.

With something this useful, people will acknowledge my skill as an alchemical apothecary! I think!

But I had to wonder if Grandma would accept that. The mana restorative was an easy, simple recipe. All I did was mix my mana into water. So even with how effective it was, I wasn't completely satisfied with this "recipe." I wanted to help more people, so to that end, a somewhat difficult-to-make original potion of mine would be perfect.

Maybe the high-grade tonic + 5, then?

That was a bit too difficult, though, since it required collecting the ingredients for a high-grade tonic.

"Tinaris?" Gibson's voiced pulled me out of my thoughts after we had walked a little ways from the fortress.

"Sorry about that. Where are your injured?" I asked, glancing around.

Oh, I can't believe I got lost in my thoughts when we're on a mission to save people. I know how dangerous it is outside the walls, too!

But then, suddenly...

"We're sorry."

"MMPH?!" I felt something press against my nose.

Wh-What's this smell?!

A strong stench filled my nostrils, quickly causing me to grow dizzy. I couldn't keep my eyes open.

"We can't let a chance like this slip us by," Russon said.

What did they have me breathe in?! Ngh, no good... I can't... think...

Ren...ge...



"NNGH..."

When I came to, my body was aching all over. I felt oddly weightless, and my head was throbbing. My consciousness felt muddled. My head didn't hurt that badly, but my thoughts were still jumbled.

"How much longer until we get there?"

"About a week. But Paradise is at hand. Isn't that right, Professor?"

"Yes, you all did very well to capture the vile witch. The Gods of Kura are very pleased. You will surely be accepted into Paradise."

"Oh, we are blessed! I will finally meet my deceased father and mother...!"

"Yes! Thank you, Gods of Kura!"

I listened in on the conversation with my eyes closed. My body didn't feel like it was in intense pain or tied up, but I couldn't move. My mind was still sluggish. All I could manage was to just barely make out what several men were saying. And whatever they were talking about certainly didn't bode well.

"Now, the break is over. Let's get into Edesa Kura territory

before the Mythicals sniff us out.”

“Yes, Professor!”

“All right, let’s keep it up a little longer. Mother, Father, I’ll see you soon...”

“Yes, I can’t wait to see my family again, too.”

“That day has finally come... It’s been so long.”

Their voices sounded so happy. They spoke of seeing their families again. They sounded cheerful. Kind. Wistful. But for some reason I couldn’t quite explain, their words gave me a terrible feeling.

I could hear the sounds of a carriage’s wheels grinding. I focused on the noise with my eyes closed, incapable of thinking properly. The voices were familiar. Two belonged to Russon and Gibson. I didn’t recognize the others.

The carriage’s wheels kept grinding against the ground. I couldn’t tell how much time had passed. I opened my eyes a crack, only to find myself looking up not at a bright sky, but at a pitch-black expanse.

The Sugula.

It had grown even larger, and it was a truly eerie sight. The sound of the carriage’s wheels grinding gradually got louder. The road was becoming more and more unsteady, but I didn’t feel the carriage rattle despite that. I opened my eyes a bit more. My field of vision was still hazy, but I made something out.

It was letters, but not in any language I was familiar with. Was this text from ancient times?

No, this is the kind of text you see when using magic. What is this doing here, floating in the air? And it’s funny, I haven’t eaten or had anything to drink for so long, but I’m not hungry or thirsty at all.

“Ugh, aaagh...” I heard heaving from a short distance away.

“Keep it up, we’re almost there!”

“R-Right!”

Their voices sounded much more desperate compared to the last time I heard them. Were these people headed back to their home village?

Where am I right now? What’s happening to me?

Little by little, my mind was clearing, but my body was still oddly sluggish.

I opened my eyes as much as I could. It was dark, but it wasn’t nighttime. The Sugula was blocking out the sunlight. On top of that,

the atmosphere was strange. I narrowed my eyes, trying to make out my surroundings.

Are those...walls?

But then, the floating letters started coiling around my body!

“Ah?!” I gasped.

Each one of those letters was a spell with the power of binding and restricting.

I can't believe it... I didn't think anyone but Shida could use magic on such a high level!

“Oh, you're finally awake,” a voice said. “You sure took your time, snoozing away.”

I froze up. They knew I was awake. My throat seized up with terror. The five knights in white armor—Russon, Gibson, and their allies—were there, and leading the group was a gray-haired old man clad in a long, white robe. His lips were twisted into a warped smile.

But what shocked me the most about the old man was the crest emblazoned on his robe.

He's a mage from the Ivory Knights!

“Allow me to introduce myself,” the old man said. “I am Medile of De Marl's Ivory Knights. Now, I'm sure you must be asking yourself why you've been taken captive by De Marl's knights?”

I remained silent. I was certainly curious about that, but I could come up with a few reasons already. Dad and Renge gave me plenty of warnings...and despite that, I got caught.

“The answer is simple,” the old man said. “Her Majesty Queen Feles Kura wishes to meet you.”

My eyes widened in shock. His answer wasn't any of the reasons I had expected at all. I thought one of the other countries might have wanted the Holy Woman's power and influence for themselves, but his reason was something else entirely.

Feles Kura. The Queen of Edesa Kura...!

What does she want with me?!

The answer was self-evident. Renge always assumed Edesa Kura was taken over by the Kaguya with a Will of its Own. And if that was true, it only made sense their queen would be a host for the Kaguya.

That horrible creature that nurtured the Sugula so it would fall over Wisty Air. That tried to completely consume the world and

make this planet its body. If nothing else, this was the Kaguya with a Will of its Own's overall objective two thousand years ago.

And although Renge managed to stop it from achieving its goals back then, Saint Akari had already passed at that point, and the Stella had no host. And so, Renge and the Elf of the Sun had to burn the falling Kaguya along with the world's surface. It was not a happy ending in any sense.

And Renge predicted that Edesa Kura had been taken over by this vile creature now. The same country that attacked my homeland and slaughtered my people to gain their Spherit Stones...

The land of my nemeses.

And the one beckoning me now was the queen of that country. My body quivered in fear. Why were knights from De Marl, Edesa Kura's greatest rival, trying to deliver me to that country's queen?

They said the queen asked to meet me...?

I couldn't believe it. This queen had ordered for my kind to be massacred for their Spherit Stones. There could only be one thing she would want from me...

She found out I was a Spherit Folk survivor.

I tried to thrash and free myself, but to no avail.

"Don't bother," the old man said. "This binding spell can even bind monsters. I don't know what Her Majesty wants from you, but to be beckoned by the queen, the living incarnation of the Gods of Kura, is a great honor. I'm sure being called a Holy Woman must have gone to your head, but Her Majesty has branded you a witch. I'm sure she will have you killed in a manner most gruesome."

Killed...in a manner most gruesome. Just like she did to the rest of my people.

Just what would she do to me, besides just tearing out the Spherit Stone from my forehead? I had no intention of finding out.

"That rebellious stare of yours..." the old man frowned. "No one's coming to save you, you know."

I met his words with silence, still staring defiantly into his dead old eyes.

"Hmph!" the old man harrumphed.

I could tell there was no point talking to this man. His eyes were stagnant. Russon and Gibson were glaring at me like I was their enemy, too, and that made me sad. But at the same time, I was absolutely confident.

Renge would definitely come save me.

A faint black spherical barrier was covering my body, the binding words floating inside it. And I could only guess, but there was probably some kind of sash holding the barrier together from the outside. The sash was what kept me alive—even without any food or water, I wouldn't die because it supplied me with Air.

Despite them holding me captive, I wasn't being treated quite as badly as I might have thought. I couldn't budge an inch, but seeing as they bound me like this, it was clear they had no intent of physically abusing me.

Did the queen order them not to hurt me?



“WE finally made it...”

“Now we can go to paradise and see our families...”

After walking for some time, we reached the tall walls we saw from a distance. Looking at them up close really made it clear how imposing it really was. They looked taller than De Marl's walls.

Is this Edesa Kura? I never imagined I'd ever enter this country like this.

The knights walked along the outside of the walls, their expressions ecstatic. Before long, a gate guarded by mechanized soldiers came into view. This was my first time seeing a mechanized soldier up close. It was too dark to see properly, but it had a cylindrical, lined, banana-shaped head with no neck that connected directly to its torso. And its limbs...

Are its hands and feet...blue? Wow.

I never saw robots that actually moved up close, not even in my past life. The white-robed old man, Medile, spoke to the mechanized soldier. Its eyes glinted as it responded in a mechanical voice, “Voice authentication confirmed.”

It then moved efficiently to open the gate.

Wow...

The rumors were true—Edesa Kura was on a technological level high enough for Saikorea to want their knowledge. While magic and alchemy developed elsewhere in the world, Edesa Kura focused on machinery. And this was a field that could be applied to wonderful things, so long as it wasn't misused.

"This is Edesa Kura..." one of the knights whispered, to which I looked toward the city.

Once we passed through the gate, we were met with a desolate land, but past that was a city. White smoke rose here and there, and there were many tall buildings. And past that was the sea.

Or at least, I thought that was the sea. It was too dark to see properly, but I could make out the sound of the waves. My hearing was better than a human's, after all. Plus, I could remember seeing on the maps that Edesa Kura was adjacent to the sea.

But there was so much smoke that it covered the sky in thick clouds, and even without that, the Sugula was blotting out the sun, resulting in poor visibility and a gloomy atmosphere.

"A-All right, one last push," one of the knights said.

"We're in the country already, can't we rest for a little?"

"Wouldn't you prefer to see your family sooner?" Medile chided him. "Once we bring the girl to the castle, you'll be able to rest all you want on the way to Paradise. Just keep it up a little longer."

"A-All right."

Paradise. Family. What are they talking about?

I had no idea, but either way, the Kaguya with a Will of Its own was duping these people. Using the Gods of Kura as a front, it promised people whatever they wanted to get them to unite under its cause. All countries did that to some extent, but Edesa Kura was nastier than the rest.

But more than anything, I was puzzled by the men pulling this carriage instead of relying on a horse. I didn't know how we got here, to begin with. They made me smell some kind of drug, and everything went fuzzy, but I was under the impression they carried me here by horse at first.

Don't tell me they had the horse move nonstop until it collapsed.

That scary thought came to mind. As far as I know, if one rode a horse nonstop, it would take a week to get from Deshmel to Edesa Kura. And even if we ran into monsters, the Stella inside me would purify them.

And by that logic, if Edesa Kura's queen was possessed by the Kaguya with a Will of its Own, me being around her would purify her body of the Kaguya. So in a sense, this was my chance to purify her. Renge probably noticed I was gone a long time ago—if a week had really passed—so he might have come to this country for me

already.

Yeah, for the time being, I'll stay quiet and just let them take me to the queen. I'm scared, though...really scared! But I'll be fine, I have the Stella on my side...!



ONCE we passed through the desolate area, we arrived at the city. It was surprisingly empty. The houses were all quite strange. They were elliptical, oblong, made of black metal, and without any gaps between them. They were all shaped like towers, and there was smoke coming out of every window.

Why all the smoke? I wondered.

The smoke billowed out of the windows nonstop, so something must have been producing it. And the cloying smell of oil and strange noises permeated the air. It felt less like a residential city and more like a factory district.

I feared the people of Edesa Kura might pelt me with stones or throw eggs at me, but there was nary a soul in the streets. And that made it all the more eerie. The place didn't feel lived in.

"Nngh, aaah!" one of the knights gasped for air as he pushed the carriage.

"Haa, aaah..."

"...S-Say, is it just me, or has it gotten harder to breathe since we entered Edesa Kura?"

"Professor, what's with all this smoke?"

"Apparently, it's a trap in case the alliance army breaks through the walls and enters the country," Medile replied. "I'm sure they are spreading poison through the air with whatever they are burning to make that smoke. Hurry, if we don't get to the castle quick, we could end up affected by it, too."

"Are you serious?! You should have said that sooner!"

"Dammit, hurry!"

"Aagh, oh, aaah...!"

Poison?! Edesa Kura's willing to steep to such lows?! This must be why there's no one outside...

But that said, I didn't feel the slightest bit suffocated. Was it because I was sitting still and not moving? Or was the barrier protecting me from it?

The knights pulled the carriage containing me in the circular barrier, with Medile leading them. The castle they were headed to looked like a mountain of junk and garbage. It was basically a patchwork structure made of rubble, and I was surprised it remained upright. And indeed, it was larger than any other building here. But there was no visible gate, only gaping holes in the rubble.

Guarding the opening were mechanized soldiers that were unlike the ones I'd seen so far. They were colored crimson, and their armor seemed thicker. Apparently, this was actually an important defensive facility despite its shabby construction, and its mechanized soldiers were a bit more embellished to match that.

"Code 808521, Medile. I've brought the witch."

"Confirming voice pattern, confirming code," a mechanized soldier replied. "Confirming, confirming. Voice pattern verified; code verified. Admittance authorized."

The mechanized soldiers parted to let us enter. The Ivory Knights' eyes gleamed with an odd mixture of exhaustion and elation. Once we entered the castle, the floor was made of proper flagstones. It was much cleaner than the walls and the city exterior. The ceiling was white with a faint shade of gray, and what looked like fluorescent lights illuminated the whole place.

It's like a hospital corridor... I mean, a modern hospital from my past life.

I was led down a corridor for a few minutes, and then Medile stopped in his tracks. We had arrived at what looked like a hall of some kind. Were we finally at the entrance hall? There were staircases extending left and right, and while there were no wall decorations, the engravings on the furnishings were extravagant. It was also furnished with a runner carpet, perhaps to prevent sliding. Standing at the top of the stairs was a man.

With the barrier blocking my field of vision, I couldn't quite tell, but his hair looked ashen-colored and his eyes were yellow. The robe he wore extended down to his feet. However, I could tell with a glance that this man was an alchemist.

"Who might you be?" Medile asked.

"Reiden Park, this country's state alchemist," the man replied. "I've received word of your arrival and came to collect the Holy Woman. You've done well. Leave the rest to me."

"No, I refuse!" Medile raised his voice in refusal. "I will deliver her to the queen personally!"

The knights were the ones who carried me here, you know! What, you think casting this spell to bind me gives you all the credit?! I thought, annoyed with Medile.

The spell did do a good job of keeping me bound, though. It was so effective the caster would definitely be wanted by every country as a state mage.

Is Medile a De Marl State Magician? Why would someone that talented defect to Edesa Kura? It didn't make sense to me. Just one glance at the state Edesa Kura was in made it the least appealing country out there, especially compared to somewhere like De Marl.

"Your audience with Her Majesty can wait for another day. Your accomplishment of having captured the Holy Woman will be rewarded. You can be sure of that. Rest in the castle for today. I will show you to your rooms."

Reiden raised his hand, to which four automatons appeared out of nowhere, surrounding us. They were faceless like mannequins, dressed in maid outfits, and walked with clanging steps.

"Guh..." Medile swallowed nervously.

The automatons gracefully brought their hands together in front of them and bowed politely.



Wow! Edesa Kura's technology is really impressive!

I was honestly impressed. The realization sank in that this man, Reiden, had used alchemy to develop these mechanical dolls. He looked fairly young, somewhere in his mid-twenties. I didn't feel the Kaguya with a Will of its Own coming from him. It appeared he was here of his own will—not because he had been taken over.

And I think I remember hearing that name before. Reiden...

Reiden Park...one of Edesa Kura's State Alchemists!

"Y-You'll let us rest? Much appreciated!" one of the knights said.

"E-Erm, Sir Reiden, will we get to go to Paradise?" Gibson asked.

"Will we get to meet our families in Paradise?! Were our achievements great enough?!"

"I don't know," Reiden replied curtly. "Ask Her Majesty when you meet her in the coming days. I have no interest in Paradise."

"You don't..." The knights were rendered speechless by this admission.

"Sugol," Reiden called out to one large mechanized soldier.

Medile and the others all went pale and stepped back, clearing the way to me.

Huh, wait, whoa...!

I squeezed my eyes shut, but it didn't feel like I was being crushed. When I opened my eyes, I found the mechanized soldier had scooped up the barrier around me and lifted me up in its arms.

H-How is this robot capable of moving so gently and precisely?! And what happened to the spell?! I can't believe it's lingering even this far from its caster!

But then I saw it. Maybe it was simply because the direction we were moving in had changed, but I could see a small ring hanging on the strip hooked to me holding the barrier together from the outside. I could instinctively tell that it was a Spherit Stone ring.

Is the ring the core of this spell?

Spherit Stones constantly gathered Air from the surroundings. By using that, it must have allowed the spell to persist indefinitely. It was probably similar to how the barriers around Deshmel and Rofola worked.

Can you really do that with Spherit Stones?

But then, I froze up in fear. Reiden was glaring at me! He looked up at me in the soldier's arms, his gaze sharp and hostile. But he soon turned his back on me and started climbing up the stairs, and the mechanized soldier carrying me followed him. It almost felt like this mechanized soldier had a will of its own.

I couldn't look back and see the knights and Medile anymore, but I heard their receding footsteps. They were likely being shown to their rooms. I did relate to their fatigue, though, so I felt they deserved a rest, even if their exhaustion stemmed from kidnapping me. I hadn't seen them sleep or eat the whole journey here, after all.

I was carried up the stairs in silence, except for the sounds the mechanized soldier made as it moved. The second-floor corridor looked much the same as the first-floor one, except that there was a glass-paned window that offered a view outside the castle, set along the left-side railing. The scenery outside was nothing but oblong buildings and smoke, though. Thanks to the Sugula hanging in the heavens, the thick cloudy sky was even blacker than usual.

Put simply, it was a dreary sight.

"Excuse me..." I spoke up but was only met with silence.

Reiden was ignoring me. Or at least, that's the feeling I got.

"I practice alchemy," I said, unable to restrain my curiosity. "I make potions and the like. Did you make these mechanized soldiers and the automatons from earlier?"

Even if we specialized in different fields, we were both alchemists. I hoped I could discuss work with him. I had heard about mechanical alchemy from Lys and Lico, and it struck me as very strange at the time. But the automatons from earlier were dressed like maids, and the mechanized soldier picked me up really gently.

I knew they were made for waging war, but I heard Reiden call the mechanized soldier by a name. And that gave me the impression that he regarded it with some affection. That gave me the courage to speak to him.

Reiden didn't stop in his tracks. He kept walking, but replied with one single, clear, sonorous word. "Correct."

I knew it. And the stiff way he's acting kind of reminds me of Grandma Elysis...

"Do you believe in any gods?" I asked.

"There are no gods in this world," Reiden answered curtly.

"The Kaguya with a Will of its Own really hasn't taken over you..." I muttered.

"Kaguya with a Will of its Own?" he repeated. He finally stopped in his tracks and turned to look at me.

Since I was still confined in the barrier, he simply lowered his gaze to meet mine, since he was a few steps above me and the mechanized soldier.

"It's a piece of that black shadow that's hanging over the sky," I explained. "They say it's got a will of its own and that it took over this country... A-At least, that's what I've heard."

He regarded me with silence.

"I-If possible, I'd like to hear what you have to say..." I murmured.

His gaze was very sharp. It gave him an aura that made him intimidating. But somehow, he wasn't scary in the same way as my father from my past life was, or the bandits who'd scooped me up when I was a baby. Reiden closed his eyes for a moment, seemingly pondering something over.

"Even if what you say is true, it's got nothing to do with me," he eventually said.

"How so?" I was shocked.

"This country is done for. Has been for years," he said with little emotion. "But I'm still here because I can do whatever I please, however I want to. The queen wants a powerful army. I want to create powerful and skilled mechanized soldiers. Our interests are in alignment, and that's all my involvement with her amounts to. Whatever she does isn't my problem."

"I-If you say so..."

Wow, I guess that's a state alchemist for you... His research comes first, ahead of everything else!

Lico once told me she became a state alchemist because she wanted to test her weapons on the battlefield. Lys had proudly told me he was making an Air Gun that could damage an Edesa Kura's mechanized soldier's armor in one shot. So while they came from different countries, I got the feeling these militant alchemists could understand each other.

But this man...Reiden. If all he wants is a work environment where he's free to do as he pleases, then that means he's not particularly attached to Edesa Kura, right?

Saikorea was eager to gain Edesa Kura's machine technology,

so couldn't they provide him with a place to do his research? And on an even simpler level than that—

"Say, Sir Reiden, would you be interested in automatic selling magic?" I ventured.

"What?" The alchemist looked at me, confused.

"Well, I'm in the process of developing magic that'll allow people to buy vegetables and medicine even if they're far away, or if there isn't a merchant nearby. But I can't come up with the right machine that'll facilitate that!"

"...What are you talking about?" he regarded me suspiciously.

"With your skills, I'm sure you'd be able to make a machine that'll be able to pull it off! That's why I'm trying to scout you!" I declared.

"Huh?"

Yes! The vending machine! Reiden should be able to do it. It would run on Air instead of electricity, but it'll be like a real vending machine, where all you have to do is put in money to get what you need!

"There's still a lot of problems that need fixing, but for example, I want to set it along the highway so that people can buy things even without anyone to man the machine!" I explained, not hiding my excitement. "You just put in the money, and it automatically provides you the product you want! With a machine like that, both the seller and the buyer will be able to trade safely! And the idea is that it'll use teleportation magic to transport the goods once the money's been put in!"

"Magic?" Reiden asked. "I'm afraid magic is outside my field of expertise."

"Don't worry about that!" I assured him. "I've got elf friends to handle the magic! But even with that issue out of the way, we'll need a machine that can accept the money and automatically produce the product, but our technology just isn't up to that standard. I have a dwarf friend who's trying to develop it, but it can't count the money and activate the magic according to how much you put in or differentiate different types of merchandise. It just doesn't do it fast enough..." I lamented.

Reiden regarded me dubiously at first, but his eyes widened as I explained my idea, and soon began to gleam with curiosity.

"So I've been thinking that this is something alchemy can solve, but I'm an alchemical apothecary, and I don't really know

much about machines... What do you think?!" I asked him.

"It's fascinating!" he nodded enthusiastically.

I knew you'd get it!

"A machine that uses magic!" he exclaimed. "I never considered that! What a groundbreaking idea! But a Spherit tool might be able to make it work. The problem is getting it to properly recognize different kinds of coins. Having it simply weigh the metal wouldn't work. The different countries issue Colt coins based on an agreed-upon metal, shape, and amount, but the techniques for issuing the coins differ by country. The amount of metal won't be exactly the same. And if their mass and shape would all be identical, the machine might recognize things that aren't money but have the same size and mass as currency, activating the teleportation magic. That would lead to fraud and hurt the seller, and that wouldn't be acceptable, would it?"

"Of course not!" I agreed.

"So, the machine would need a feature that would allow it to properly recognize money as currency. If possible, it would be best if it recognized it by sight. Or maybe a system that can identify metallic sounds and distinguish them through the sound of the metal dropping down... Hm, this is a challenging task...!"

"R-Right!" I nodded.

Him saying that really made me realize how difficult of a task this was. Did vending machines back in my old world really manage to account for all these obstacles? It gave me a renewed appreciation for how smart inventors in my past life were.

I used vending machines all the time without thinking about it, but technology in my past life really was impressive...! How did those machines work?! I'm really curious now!

"In fact, it's not just difficult," Reiden mused. "It might even be more complicated than making these automatons and mechanized soldiers."

Huh?! No way! These walking machines are less complicated than something that existed in my past life?!

"And including teleportation magic in that, too... That's a ludicrous idea..." Reiden frowned.

Vending machines in my past life didn't use magic, though, so he was right to feel overwhelmed by the idea. But seeing him say it with such a severe expression really made me wonder if it was all that ludicrous.

"It's a fascinating idea," he finally admitted. "I will positively consider cooperating with you."

"Really?! Thank you!" I would have jumped with joy if I could move.

"But that all hinges on you and me leaving this country alive," Reiden added curtly. "You have no idea what the person you're about to meet is like."

"Ah...!"

The person I'm about to meet...

I felt all my enthusiasm take a nosedive. I swallowed nervously. Talking to another human being properly made me momentarily forget the situation I was in, and that wasn't wise.

"I know who I'm meeting," I said in a grim voice. "That magician told me the queen, Feles Kura, wants to see me."

"Indeed."

Reiden paused for a moment, closed his eyes, nodded, and turned his back to me. He started walking, his footsteps echoing loudly, and the mechanized soldier he called Sugol followed him with me in its arms.

If we make it out alive... I'll be fine. Renge will come and save me, for sure.

I was oddly confident of that, and so I watched Reiden open the doors without much dread. They were the last set of doors at the end of the hall. They were tall, double doors that opened from the center, and he pushed them open with both hands. They gave way with a loud creak.

The door's coloring was too subdued to be a metallic door, and indeed, it turned out to be wooden. The space behind it was dim, except for the throne at the back of the room, which was illuminated with a skylight from the ceiling. Reiden approached it slowly. There were five mechanized soldiers on each side of the room, all of them kneeling.

The throne, however, was empty. Reiden walked up and opened a red curtain behind the throne. At first, I thought it was all a performance of some sort, but as it turned out, that wasn't the case.

The moment I saw what was there, my whole body stiffened up. I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists. With the magic locking me in place, I couldn't move much as it was, but I could tell my body was stiffening regardless. My throat clenched up and my

breaths came out in gasps.

“A pleasure to finally meet you, Holy Woman.”

The voice sounded strange, like this person had a tube inserted into their throat and their voice was leaking out of it. The whole wall was covered in cords and thick hoses, and seated slightly above the throne was a small child who looked like she was buried in all those wires. Everything but the child's face looked mechanical, and even her face was covered in a metallic mask.

I couldn't tell which way the voice came from. The mask parted down the middle, opening horizontally. It was like a CG image from a movie. Its face was reminiscent of a silver circuit board, and it reminded me of a skull with all the skin removed.

Is she...a cyborg or something?

There was no visible skin anywhere on its face.

Is this...this country's queen? No way...!

I was sure the core of the Kaguya with a Will of its Own occupied the queen's body, but I never anticipated this.

“I am Feles Kura... The queen of this country.”

The voice was uneven, some of the words coming across as muffled. It seemed to be echoing from within the tubes blocking her off from sight. I was surprised the voice traveled at all in this vast audience chamber. The tubes covering the walls must have granted her voice an echo. She was a gruesome sight to behold. Looking at her made me feel more disgusted than ever before.

This is Edesa Kura's queen... This is Feles Kura?!

“You can excuse yourself now. Leave, Reiden.”

Reiden bowed his head wordlessly and, after glancing at me, signaled for Sugol to gently place my barrier on the floor. Reiden then turned around and left through the doors. I couldn't look to him for help anymore, and he wasn't on my side to begin with. Plus, I had a feeling I'd have to face the queen on my own no matter what.

But I never expected this situation, and I had no idea what to do now. I was so certain all this time that she was possessed by the Kaguya's core, but she wasn't. I had to let Renge know. I had to tell him the core wasn't possessing Edesa Kura's queen, but was somewhere else.

“Heheh, heheheh...”

“Ugh...”

I could hear eerie noises. Crackling. Snapping. Crawling. The

wall swelled up, and the cyborg that called itself the queen of Edesa Kura stepped out of the wall. The sight of it made me freeze up with fear, even though I was already incapable of moving thanks to the barrier.

Her legs reached the floor. Her feet, which were buried into the wall, did have pink skin and five toes each. To my surprise, she was perfectly human below the knees. But everything above that was different. It was a patchwork of filthy colors. I saw metallic plates, and though some of them were refined to be circular and sloping, the arms extending under her shoulders were armed with firearms. Both her hands were loaded with weapons that greatly exceeded her body's size.

She wasn't wearing any clothes, and muzzles protruded from her chest and stomach. Her face was probably completely replaced by sensors or something of the sort. I wasn't all that familiar with weaponry, but even I could tell that she was, quite literally, armed to the teeth. Her back was still connected with wires and tubes to the wall.

"Heheheh, heheheheh..."

I swallowed nervously. My throat went bone-dry and was seizing up painfully. She approached me slowly, step by step. And the way she moved, the way she cackled, all trudged up memories.

I heard this laughter three years ago, during the battle at the Caralus Plains.

"Human mages do some good work. I ended up modifying this body for nothing."

"...You're...the Kaguya with a Will of its Own... The Dwarf inside the Bottle..."

"Correct! Heheh, heheheheheh..."

I was sure he didn't occupy her body, so...how...?

"Y-You can occupy...non-living bodies, too...?" I asked.

"Neheheh, that's a...trade secret. But that said, I never expected the Stella to survive... I never accounted for that. How did you claim it?"

I remained silent. It looked at me with red, button-like eyes. With a heaving sound, it dragged the lump of weapons it called an arm along the floor, using its size to pull itself closer to me and look at me at eye level. It stopped right in front of the barrier.

This terrible barrier was now protecting me like a fortress. I prayed, shivering, begging for the barrier to last. It was clear this

thing had the means to kill me. And despite us being so close, the Stella wasn't purifying it. In other words, this mechanical body hid some kind of secret. A secret that allowed it to cancel out the Stella's power.

So long as it had that ability, the Stella wouldn't be able to purify this thing. And without the Stella's power, I was just a defenseless girl in the face of this mechanical monstrosity.

"If you don't want to say how you got it, that's fine by me. I'll just kill anyone who bears the Stella's power. You won't get in my way any longer."

"Wh-Why...?" I stammered.

"Why what?"

"Why are you trying to drop the Sugula on this world? Why would you do that? Everyone's going to die... D-Do you want to destroy the world that badly? What do you gain from that?!" I asked in a rush.

Its face was like a circuit board. I couldn't tell what face the queen originally had. Its physique was just barely feminine, too, and the only thing to give it some semblance of a human form was its legs.

And now that I knew that this body was the host of my greatest enemy, I could say it for certain:

Edesa Kura had been taken over by the Kaguya with a Will of its Own.

This is terrible...

When did it take over this country? And why did it slay my people and set fire to my country? Was it for the Spherit Stones? For the Stone of Daybreak? Didn't it do it all to create the Sugula? But why did it want that? To destroy the world? But why would it want to do that?

Why did my father and mother have to die for this thing? Why?!

This was the one question I needed answered. Even if I was going to die here...!

"Why? Destroy...? What are you talking about?" the machine replied, seeming confused. ***"Did one of my other selves tell you something? Aah, I'm sorry, then. Once we separate, my other selves and I become separate individuals. What they think differs from me."***

"What...?!"

"I'm not trying to destroy the world. I do want my own body,

yes. A body of my own. And I will take this imperfect world and turn it into its perfect form."

"Perfect...form?" I parroted the words.

What does it mean, mistaken world? What is it saying?

The fact its words were so devoid of emotion made it all the more eerie.

"Why do living things have to die?" it suddenly asked me.

I stared back at it, unsure of where it was going with that question.

"Why does God...why does Air profit from the end of life? Is there meaning to things ending? Poor living things. I've always kept asking myself this, inside my bottle. The one who made me tried to make an elixir of life to prolong a loved one's life. But that precious human rejected it. It denied it! Why?"

"Ah!"

...It's talking about what Renge said about Akari and Keria!

If this was really the Dwarf inside the Bottle, it was born of the Saint Elixir Keria had made while trying to find a way to prolong Akari's lifespan. It made sense it knew about what had happened back then.

"The one who made me was heartbroken but accepted her decision. He said all life is bound to end. But I didn't understand. Why? Can you give me the answer to that question?"

"W-Well, I..." I mumbled.

"You can't, can you? Right, humans are extremely emotional creatures. That's why you think, you desire... Why you want to always be with the ones you love."

I fell silent. This was what everyone wished for—myself, included—and I couldn't answer its question. But though its question was valid...

H-How does that connect to destroying the world?! That question has nothing to do with what it's actually doing!

"That's why I'm going to remake this world. I'll consume this whole world with the Sugula, and everything will become part of the Sugula and me. All life will become one. Can you imagine that? All life in the world will get to live forever! The man who made me is dead already, but...I won't deny his efforts! I won't reject him, I will affirm him, I will prove him right!"

"Don't tell me the knights who brought me over and that mage, Medile, believe that story?!"

"Oh, them? No, I twisted the story into what they wanted to hear. Something you humans might like. I told them that in my world, people will be able to meet their dead family."

"You lied to them!" I shouted.

Using their dead family as bait?! That's cowardly! How could it lie to people like that?!

"I didn't lie to anyone. It's half true. Their feelings for their family will last forever, inside me."

"That's wrong!" I insisted.

"No, it isn't wrong. And to keep victims like them from appearing again, I'll mature the Sugula as much as I can. And I will destroy the Stella that's keeping me from doing that. This time you won't get in my way."

I glared at its metal face.

"I'll have you executed tomorrow... I'll let the humans do it. I'm sure they'll find a cruel, gruesome, terrible, and merciless way of doing it. I'll leave them to come up with the right method. I'm sorry I can't do it myself, but I still need to...conserve energy, because Renge is still alive."

Renge. To this thing, Renge was a bigger threat than the Stella. The power Renge showed in the Caralus Plains really was terrifying, and even back then, he probably wasn't showing the full extent of what he was capable of. And on top of that, he destroyed the Sugula two thousand years ago, too.

So this thing has a grudge to settle with Renge, and in the face of that, I'm hardly worthy of interest.

"There's one more thing I have to ask," I told the Kaguya with a Will of its Own.

The Kaguya simply looked at me wordlessly.

"What was the reason you attacked the country of Jiera sixteen years ago?"

"Jiera...? You mean the Spherit Folk country? Why do you care about that?"

"My... My father died defending that country!" I replied.

That wasn't a lie, and it was enough to keep the fact I was a Spherit Folk secret. As I glared silently at the Kaguya, it tilted its skull-like face curiously, silently, like it was observing me.

Did it figure out that I'm a Spherit Folk?

"Fine. If it'll help you die in peace, I'll tell you. I'm not so cruel as you humans after all. It was to take the Stone of

Daybreak from that country.”

The Stone of Daybreak...I knew it!

Everything clicked together once I heard that. The miraculous stone that can make any wish come true. And summoning such evil to the world made it a cursed stone.

“To create that stone, I had to shake the Spherit Folks’ emotions. It was pretty hard. I had to torture them without letting them die.”

I gritted my teeth in disgust.

“It was a challenge. I had to hire mercenaries, and the knights of De Marl got in the way. But it was worth it. Thanks to that, I created the Sugula. I have to thank the Spherit Folk for that, ahahaha!”

This thing doesn’t deserve to exist.

I realized that truth from the bottom of my heart. My body shivered, but not from terror. My tears ran, but not from grief. I had to restrain the urge to scream out loud. I wished I could tell it to just drop dead...but I felt like that would make me as bad as my father from my past life.

But I was able to restrain myself, mostly because I could hardly remember my real mother and father. I couldn’t tell if that was a good or bad thing, though. I also knew that if I said the wrong thing, I’d just be cutting my life shorter by giving this monster a legitimate reason to torture me.

After all, I was speaking to Edesa Kura’s queen, Feles Kura.

Mom, Dad, I’m sorry. I can’t curse this thing out for your deaths right now...! I have to defend myself, to protect the life you gave me!

“Oh, but you didn’t ask me what the Stone of Daybreak is, did you?”

I suppressed a gasp and nibbled the inside of my cheek for that terrible slip-up.

“Do you know what the Stone of Daybreak is...? Hm? Who told you about that? Tell me who told you about the stone...”

“R-Renge told me,” I said hurriedly, averting my eyes from the Kaguya. “He said the Sugula was created because you prayed to the Stone of Daybreak...”

“Renge, eh...? Right, I suppose he would know. I see. Hm...”

I couldn’t explain it, but it kind of felt like the Kaguya’s face grew longer. It drew closer to the barrier, its eerie, skull-like face pressing against it. The mention of Renge’s name made it pull away,

but I could still see the skull-like face from up close and shuddered upon seeing hair growing directly out of it.

"That's interesting in its own way," it said.

"How?"

"You're the daughter of a man who tried to defend Jiera from me. And you gained the power of the Stella, and now stand in my way alongside Renge, the man who ruined my ambitions once before... It's strange how we seem to be connected, isn't it? Heheh, heheheheheh..."

...Yes, that's right. You destroyed my homeland and killed my people. I, the sole survivor, ended up being the Stella's heir and stand in your way alongside Renge. How I wished I could give this disgusting monster a piece of my mind.

The Kaguya slowly drew away from me inside the queen's body. It seemed that after taking over this body, the Kaguya freely tweaked it to suit its needs. It dragged its body, which was heavier than its size might suggest, back to its original position, its weaponized arm grating against the floor.

It buried its legs into the wall of chords, bent down into a sitting position, and sank its body all the way up to its chest. With its arms and everything from the neck down inside the wall, it once again seemed to become one with the machinery.

"I'm interested in you now. Let's spend the night together. I wonder how you'll die tomorrow. Humans can be pretty cruel when it comes to killing someone, so I'm curious to see what they'll do to you."

I wordlessly looked away from it, refusing to give it the satisfaction of my attention. I still couldn't move my body, but I could at least do this.

Nothing this thing said was coherent. Eternity? Become one? This thing really does deserve to be destroyed.

I bit my lip angrily. I was so frustrated. I didn't know I could feel so helpless without the Stella's power or any of my alchemy inventions to defeat this thing. It wasn't the first time I felt powerless, but it was certainly the first time that I'd felt so frustrated.

"Heheheh, heheheheheheh..."

It gleefully watched me hold back tears of anger and helplessness from its spot within the wall, giggling. I hated the fact reality permitted this unsightly thing to exist.

This must be what it feels like to hate someone with all your being...

With my limbs restrained, I couldn't even wipe my tears. The monster watched me all night long, laughing.

I was confident that I would never have a night as terrible as this one for as long as I lived.



THE next morning, the mechanized soldiers started moving.

Right... They were in here with us since yesterday.

Two mechanized soldiers lifted the barrier containing me with their hands and prepared to leave the audience chamber. The doors opened, and Feles Kura, who was buried in the wall the whole time, bid me farewell. I was relieved this meant the end of our miserable time together. I wished I could tell her I never wanted to see her face again, but I didn't have the nerve to say that.

"Dwarf Inside the Bottle. Let me tell you just one thing," I said.

Feles Kura's skull-like face tilted as it looked at me. I pitied the girl who served as the Kaguya's host. Her legs...or what was left of them, looked like they belonged to a fourteen, perhaps fifteen-year-old girl. She was about the same age as me. But her body was taken over, and she was reduced to this gruesome form.

For all the grandiose reasons this creature spouted, in the end, it didn't care about anyone else so long as it got what it wanted. If it suited its ends, it would use people like tools, and then kill them once it had no use for them!

"You...you said that once you become one with the world, all living things will become perfect and eternal, but that's a mistake. You're wrong."

Feles Kura regarded me with silence.

"Because you never considered what'll come after that!"

The Kaguya with a Will of Its Own...Feles's body retreated back into the wall of cords and wires. As if to say my words weren't worth listening to.

With that, the mechanized soldiers escorted me back through the same corridors that led me to that hellish room, down the stairs, and into the entrance hall, where Reiden stood with Sugol at his side. Reiden averted his eyes from me. It wasn't clear what he felt

upon seeing me like this.

Reiden then started walking ahead, like he was leading the mechanized soldiers with me. We advanced down a long corridor and past the gate, which looked like a gigantic hole. We then took a turn into another passage, one we didn't use yesterday.

At the end of that passage was a plaza full of people. It had a wooden platform, and I was placed on top of it. At the very front row were the De Marl knights—Russon and Gibson—now out of their disguises and clad in Edesa Kura uniforms. Medile was there too, and he regarded me with a nasty smirk.

I looked away from his unpleasant smile, looking around the plaza, only to be overcome with shock. Everyone there looked at me with hatred in their eyes. They seemed surprised to see there was someone like me in the country, but at the same time, the loathing and hatred in their gazes indicated complete and total disinterest in me.

It feels just like...back then...

This was a familiar sensation. I felt this back in my past life, when I was an outcast during my school days. When my so-called father became sick, I had to help out around the house and stopped hanging out with my friends. That was how I became an outcast. I felt isolated. No one looked at me with this much hatred back then, but it still reminded me of that time.

Right. It feels like I'm an outsider...

I always felt like I was normal, but apparently to other people, I looked like an outsider who didn't belong. And now that I had reincarnated, I really was different from the rest of the world. I was a Spherit Folk, after all, which meant I wasn't human. I was the last of my kind. Literally. I might have felt like I was one of them, but maybe...

Maybe I'm the only one who thought I was like everyone else. Like I belonged.

I hung my head.

Right. I'm not human. I'm a demi-human.

I always thought demi-humans were just another kind of human, but from the perspective of "normal" people, things must have looked different. After all, I could concoct potions a normal human couldn't. I could cast spells no human could.

I never really understood how I was different from the rest,

and that's how I ended up being exploited and found myself in this mess.

"We will now commence the witch's execution!" a soldier stepped up in front of me and addressed the mob.

"You all brought your stones, yes?" another soldier asked. "Then line up and stone her in order. Make sure to aim properly!"

It occurred to me they couldn't throw stones at me with the barrier in the way, but then I realized that Medile was there. He could undo the spell and allow them to stone me to death.

I bet being stoned is going to hurt...

I didn't have any tonics on me, but even if I used holy magic to heal myself, I wouldn't last long if this many people threw stones at me. It wouldn't be long before I'd die...

"Offer your gratitude to the Gods of Kura for the privilege of being allowed to slay this witch!"

"We offer our gratitude!" the people in the plaza said as one.

The sheer insanity of the scene filled me with terror. Until then, my despair over the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own was stronger than the fear of what might happen to me. But without the barrier to protect me, the death closing in on me would swoop in without mercy.

I was surrounded by mechanized soldiers and a crowd of deranged people. I had nowhere to run.

The only one who would possibly let me escape was Reiden, and he was refusing to look my way, and didn't seem inclined to help. It only made sense that this country's state alchemist wouldn't side with me, though. I shouldn't have expected much of him, to begin with.

...Oh, if I'm going to die like this, I'd have been better off confessing to Renge, even if it meant making a Stone of Daybreak.

I closed my eyes. A long time ago, soon after my birth, beasts had attacked the bandits that pulled me out of the water. This was probably how those bandits felt when the beasts locked eyes with them.

This time, I felt even sadder than I did back then. I felt the realization of my impending death settle in.

But back then...

"Medile, undo the barrier," the head soldier said.

"Yes..." Medile said, but then he suddenly raised his voice in a shout. "Huh?! Who are you?!"

The sound of murmuring filled the plaza. I opened my eyes to look. There stood a faint, dark form, with a braid of black hair and a gray scarf wrapped around its neck.

Am I dreaming...?

"I try to be tolerant of humans. I know you're forgetful creatures, after all... But it seems you're in need of a grim reminder every now and then."

"Ah..." this shocked utterance left my lips.

"Now, then," Renge's finger touched the barrier's strip, and the barrier broke.

"Whoa!"

Since I'd been floating until now, I immediately fell down when the barrier dispersed, but Renge caught me in his arms.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he whispered into my ear. "This country's stench is too disgusting, so I couldn't track your scent."

Right, there's all this smoke, and it smells weird... Ah, no, that doesn't matter now...

"Renge..." I started.

"Yes," he said.

"Renge, I..."

"Yes," he nodded.

It felt like something that had been very cold until now suddenly warmed up. Like a tension inside me finally loosened up. I didn't want to think of anything. Of nothing at all... All I wanted was for him to keep holding me like this. That was all I needed.

"Everything's going to be fine now," he patted me on the head.

I felt tears streak down my cheeks.



Renge... Renge... His name dominated my thoughts. This isn't a dream? This is real, right...?

The relief gave way to sleepiness that overcame me all of a sudden. It was warm and pleasant... I surrendered my body to this sensation, unaware that this was Renge's sleep magic at play.

I mean, I'm just...so...sleepy...



WHEN I woke up with a start, I could hear the whirring of wind from afar, as well as high-pitched rumbling that sounded like distant screaming.

Wind brushed against my cheek. Before my eyes, multiple tornadoes whirled, producing a loud screeching noise. The wind uprooted entire buildings, which were propelled into the sky with comical ease. Lightning crackled, gouging into the earth with a flash.

I could hear rolling thunder. A black giant rushed in from the distance.

Is that...a tidal wave?

"What the...?" I muttered.

"Tina, get down!" I heard a familiar voice call out to me.

"Dad?!"

Dad was pulling me by the arm.

What is he doing here...? Wait, where am I?! What's going on?!

I looked down in surprise. I could see the white, hard ground. It felt oddly warm. I ran my hand over the ground, only to hear a burst of ticklish laughter fill my mind.

"Hehehe. Stop that, it tickles."

"Curalius?!" I exclaimed in disbelief.

"Now, keep your head down. We should move a bit further away from here. Renge used his black fire. The resulting tidal wave will reach as far as here, too."

"He what...?"

"Tina," Dad cut me off, his eyes telling me to just do as I'm told.

I listened to Curalius's instructions and got down, flattening my body against the dragon's back. I could feel a small tremor, but the sound was dying down little by little. I turned to look at the sea,

where I saw a tidal wave standing a hundred feet tall swallow up a city...no, an entire country.

I was speechless. What was I looking at?

"What...happened?" I finally managed to ask Dad.

Dad, too, was rendered speechless at the sight of a whole country being swallowed up by water, but he came to when he sensed my gaze looking up at him. His expression turned meek.

"When we heard you went missing, we panicked and started looking for you. There's plenty of countries that would want to snatch you away, but only *one* would actually do it," he said grimly.

"And then we found out this country really did abduct you, and was about to end your life, at that. It was terrifying. We are fortunate that Renge is still calm."

"Th-That's him being calm?" Dad asked, exasperated.

"He is. Renge has the blood of a very intelligent, stoic race, but if something were to become of Tinaris, he could certainly be overcome with anger. And if that were to happen, the human continent might well cease to exist."

"H-He can do that...?" Dad and I both asked at once.

The whole continent?!

"Surely you can tell he's capable of it after seeing this. His race holds in their body a black flame that gives them powers. And Renge's power is to bring about natural disasters and cataclysms. Just like that."

I followed Curalius's gaze, only to flinch. The tidal wave swallowed up Edesa Kura, and when it receded, nothing remained. This was a calamity Renge single-handedly brought about. It wasn't just the tidal wave. Earthquakes shook the ground; tornados tore through the air; localized lightning crackled. The ground fractured and bulged out, only for the outcrops of rocks to be swept away by the tidal wave.

It was a sight that made one lesson painfully clear—humans are powerless in the face of nature's wrath.

"Whenever he calls upon a disaster, Renge can only decide its place and scale," Curalius explained. *"He does not know what calamity he will call forth, or how it will destroy the land. He hates nothing more than to take lives, but Renge chose to use that power. The humans must take the meaning behind this to heart...however many of them will survive this."*

"No..." I whispered.

Renge would always say that all he's good for is destroying things.

This must have been what he meant. But why...?

"Ah!" Dad looked in a certain direction. "What's happening?"

"It is coming out, it seems."

Edesa Kura had been swallowed by seawater. But suddenly, one spot began to bubble up violently. The water swelled in a dome-like shape, and within it appeared a gigantic mechanized soldier.

No, that's...!

"I-Is that Edesa Kura's castle?" Dad asked.

"No, it isn't!" I shouted.

The tornados and lightning died down, and the wave that swallowed up the country whirled and brewed. Within those waters, a wave surged up where the castle used to be.

It stood up, like one of those mechs from a Saturday morning cartoon!

What is that?!

"You got in my way again, Renge...!" the mechanical giant spoke with an echoing reverb.

I-It can talk?!

That muffled voice sounds like Feles Kura—the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own?!

"Ah..."

A warped castle. A mechanical body, buried into a wall full of hoses and wires. Alchemy that's built around making mechanized soldiers and automatons.

It can't be...that's not possible, right? They wouldn't go that far!

It was using the entire castle as its own body.

"I will be the one to bring eternity to this world. I will become eternal! So stop getting in my way!" It swung up a gigantic hand, which seemed to grab something in midair.

"Renge!" Dad called out.

"Dad, you can see what's happening?!"

"Let us watch this exchange," Curalius said calmly.

"Ah!" I exclaimed as the air in front of me suddenly swayed.

This must have been Curalius's magic at play. Suddenly, I could see what was happening clearly. It was like I was peering into a telescope. But I didn't have time to be impressed with the spell, because I could see Renge caught in the giant hand's grip!

Half his face was hidden behind his scarf, as always, but his eyes weren't like they always were. They seemed somehow cold.

“Eternal, you say...” Renge muttered. “You can say whatever you want, but in the end, your very existence is fruitless. You have absolutely nothing, so much so that it’s pitiful. You can claim my uncle was your reason, but that reason isn’t even something you believe in. You can cling to that excuse all you want, but you’ve taken countless lives. So I’ll have you pay for your crimes by sentencing you to burn forever until you finally perish... I’ll give you the eternity you want so badly.”

“Nonsense! I will make my father’s wish a reality! I will achieve eternity! This is what I was born for! To make a world that isn’t as incomplete and flawed as this one, but a perfect world where no one dies! I—”

What is it talking about? Father? Does it mean Keria Veraj...?

Even though it was through coincidence, Keria, who became known as the first alchemist, was the one who created the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own. He attempted to concoct an elixir of life that would save his sister, Akari. But she rejected it, hoping to teach Renge that life is bound to end. And having realized that, Keria chose to spill the completed elixir down a well.

The Kaguya with a Will of Its Own was born when the Saint Elixir he made in the process of creating the elixir of life mixed with a bit of Camilla that had accumulated within the bottle.

So in that regard, Keria could be seen as the Kaguya’s “father.” I assumed that Keria had accepted Akari’s last wishes and discarded the elixir of life as a result, but maybe the Kaguya thought otherwise. Maybe it interpreted the situation as Akari rejecting her brother’s wishes, and he threw away the elixir in his despair.

But even so, trying to swallow up the whole world over that thought... I can’t understand it. No one wants such a sad world. Alchemy was made to enrich the lives of those who can’t use magic. And as the progenitor of this art, Keria wouldn’t have wanted this!

Renge was right. It was just like he said—the Kaguya was a fruitless existence. It wasn’t born into this world because someone wanted it to exist, but by accident. So it must have spent its life looking for a reason. A reason to justify its birth. And the answer it found to that question was completely and utterly misguided and mistaken.

“Ugh?!”

The arm holding onto Renge melted away with a dull sound. Part of the castle started melting away with a loud screech. The

molten metal spilled into the sea beneath them, where it cooled and hardened.

The castle swung its remaining arm to grab Renge again, but it melted away the next second.

Even with my vision augmented by Curalius's spell, I couldn't understand what had just happened. A half-transparent sphere formed, growing larger and gradually covering the Kaguya's body.

That sphere is probably a barrier. A barrier to keep it from running away...

"...Goodbye," the words spilled from my lips before I knew it.

I shouldn't have had to spare any words of farewell to that monster. But I still felt like I had to. If nothing else, I believed that Keria would have been saddened if he had been here. After all, he was the one who created this thing, even if by accident. And I knew that if I was in his shoes, I'd be sad to see this.

"Hell Flame—Concept Erasure," Renge said.

"Agh?!"

"I will erase the concept of your existence. With this, you will never be born again. Goodbye."

"Aah, aaaaaaaaaah!"

Black flames burned the Kaguya. It all burned, leaving neither ashes nor any of its existence behind.

This is Renge's power. He looks like...using that power causes him so much pain...

The Kaguya truly was fruitless. And my homeland, my parents, and my people were killed by this empty, hollow thing.



WITH the Kaguya destroyed, Curalius found a place to settle, and we got off her back, finally placing our feet on solid ground. The soil of Edesa Kura was left cracked and covered in protrusions, most of it washed away by the tidal wave. It was a disaster.

Devastation—in its most literal sense. This was Renge's power, and the reason he called himself someone who was only capable of destruction. Even from afar, I couldn't imagine that there used to be a country on this newly formed wasteland.

"I wish I could say it's all over now, but we're not that lucky," Dad whispered as he looked up at the sky.

I looked up in disbelief. I was getting used to the dark sky by now, mostly because I thought it was dark due to the rainclouds and tornado Renge invoked. But that wasn't the reason. I gulped.

"Th-The Sugula..." I muttered in shock.

Until now, I could always vaguely see the Sugula from afar, but now it wasn't visible. The sky was covered in darkness, so much so that I had to ask myself why we could even see each other.

"The ground is glowing," I pointed out.

"Huh? It is?" Dad looked down.

"It's the Air..." Curalius explained. *"The Sugula is doing this. It's started sucking up the Air from the ground."*

"It's sucking up the Air?!"

This explained why I could see Dad and Curalius despite the dark sky. The Sugula above us was starting to suck up the Air.

You're joking, right?! What'll happen to Wisty Air if it drains away all the Air?!

"Tina, you're awake." Renge descended from the sky, noticing me.

"Oh, Renge! Are you hurt?!" I asked, worriedly looking him over for any injuries.

"Huh? Me? I'm fine... You were watching?"

I was worried because it looked like the Kaguya might crush him in its hand, but he looked fine. Instead, he greeted me with an anxious expression.

Oh, is he worried about how I might react...?

"Yes. I saw your power," I nodded.

The devastation of Edesa Kura. The country deserved this fate, but in a sense, its citizens were all brainwashed. Their country caused suffering to people across the human and demi-human continents. But even so, there wasn't a country or race out there that could vanish off the face of the world without someone to lament it.

"Yes, well...I did warn them, for what it's worth," he said sadly. "I doubt many of them survived, though."

"Renge..."

He looked like he was in pain. The sorrow in his eyes was evident. I reached out my right hand and cradled his cheek. He looked at me with surprise.

"I know, Renge. I know you didn't want to kill anyone," I told him. "But there's no overlooking what that country did. They

created the Sugula and were ruled by the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own. There's no telling how many of the Kaguya's body doubles were hiding there. You did what had to be done."

"I completely destroyed the concept of the Dwarf inside the Bottle's existence," he said. "From now on, even if you mix a Saint Elixir with Kaguya, something like it won't ever be born again."

"Really?!" I couldn't hide my delight at that news.

"But the matter of mankind's faith in the false gods...that's something that has to be dealt with thoroughly, or the contamination will keep spreading. There's no forgiving the people who abducted you. I couldn't risk them trying to hurt you in the future. So I acted on impulse. Even though I shouldn't have done this..."

"That's not—" I tried to refute his words.

"What are you two getting all emotional for?" a voice suddenly cut into our exchange.

Huh? Did I just hear Shida's voice?

I turned around, looking for him, and—

Wh-What?!

"Ah, Elf of the Sun?" Renge said, surprised. "What are you doing here...?! And that's—"

Shida was floating in the air, and on the hill behind him was a large group of mechanized soldiers, mythical beasts, demi-humans, and people.

What's going on?!

"Hah, don't underestimate me, comrade of the olden king!" Shida exclaimed. "Through your advice, I have fully unleashed the Olden King's Grimoire's power. And with my mana, using your teleportation magic is child's play!"

"And also, since I knew you would blame yourself for killing Edesa Kura's citizens, I instructed him to save as many people as possible," Curalius explained.

"C-Curalius?!" Renge exclaimed.

What?!

"Oh, the Blue Demon Wolf of De Marl. I thought we'd never meet again," another voice called out from behind me.

"Oh, you survived, too?" Dad said. "The Mechanical Alchemist, Reiden Park."

"Reiden!" I called out upon seeing him.

There were mechanized soldiers on the hill, accompanying the

people, after all. They must have been Reiden's creations.

"Hey, Tina, since when do you know Reiden?" Dad asked me suspiciously.

"Huh? Well, we were, uh, having some business negotiations..." I said, unsure of how much detail to go into right now.

"Seriously?" Dad gave me an exasperated look.

"Oh, yes, you mentioned a selling machine," Reiden said. "I did say I'd help you with it, assuming we both got out of the country alive. I'll make good on that offer."

"You meant it?!"

Right, I should introduce him to Shida next—wait, no. That's not important right now.

"Can you tell me what you're doing here, first? Dad, Shida, Curalius." I looked at them each in order.

"Listen here, young lady. It's been a week since you went missing," Dad said, exasperated. "Of course we'd come save you."

"It's been that long?!" I thought it might take that long to travel to Edesa Kura, but I had no idea how much time had actually passed.

"I was administered the Saint Elixir you made, and it helped me greatly recover. I considered refusing to take it, but when I heard you were abducted, I decided to agree."

Like I thought, Curalius wanted to refuse extending her life, but she changed her mind when she thought she could help save me.

"When I returned to Rofola on a whim, I found the Blue Wolf there," Shida gestured toward Dad. "When we heard you went missing, my wife became so worried she kicked me until I agreed to help."

"I-I'm sorry?!" I apologized.

The part about Nakona kicking him was probably a lie, but Nakona probably did something that was close enough to kicking him. I wouldn't put it past her!

"Hmph, don't mention it," Shida scoffed proudly. "You are my sister-in-law and my apprentice, after all! And my wife is here to see you, too."

"Yeah! Well, there's a lot to unpack here, but... Wait, Nakona's here, too?!" I just couldn't keep up anymore.

"Yes, even if the olden king's friend hadn't destroyed this

country, she would have certainly sown devastation in her own way..." Shida shrugged. "Though I suppose there's a limit to how much destruction a single human can sow. But still, if my wife asked me to do it for her, why, I'd have unleashed all I had upon the region, and it would've been destroyed just the same!"

"Uh-huh..." I cringed a little.

The way he was trying to act cute about it was honestly pretty gross!

"The Elf of the Sun, eh..." Reiden mumbled. "So your group would have been able to destroy Edesa Kura whenever you wanted, after all. I see."

"Reiden..." I looked at him sadly.

"Correct, Mechanical Alchemist," Curalius nodded her long head. "However, since we are blessed with so much power, we Mythical Beasts elect to simply observe the human continent's conflicts from afar. Renge especially takes care not to interfere..."

Reiden looked up at her massive form silently and then closed his eyes.

"But you abducted the Holy Woman, and even tried to take her life. Doing that was an act of aggression against the Mythical Beasts. If you kept your vile acts contained to the human continent, we would have overlooked it. But raising your hands against her was forbidden. If anyone were to try and harm the Holy Woman, we would act. That was something we had already relayed to the humans and the demi-humans. And since you engaged the others in war, Edesa Kura must have known that. You went after the Holy Woman knowing the consequences, didn't you?"

"The thing wearing Feles's skin wished for as much, so you must be right," Reiden said. "That country has probably been dead for the last twenty years, so it probably doesn't matter that you erased it from the map now."

"Reiden..." I murmured.

Dad and Shida exchanged a glance behind me. As Reiden stood there, his eyes closed, Dad took out a rope.

"Reiden Park, we will now tie you up."

"Very well," he nodded. "But there's one thing I need to tell you."

"What is it?"

"That country was full of Feles's puppets. Everyone who was charged with governing it were under her thumb."

"Yes, we know. That is why we did not save them."

"Is that right? Impressive..." Reiden said.

Does Curalius mean the Kaguya's body doubles?

Come to think of it, the Mythicals were able to pick up on the body doubles' scent. That means they left all the humans who were infested by the Kaguya to die along with Edesa Kura.

"Reiden Park, did you realize Feles Kura was taken over and infesting other people?" Dad asked. "How long did you know?"

"That doesn't matter. Not now," Reiden replied coldly. "I noticed, but did nothing to stop her. That is my crime. My sin. I, who couldn't protect even a single apprentice of mine..."

"...I see."

His *apprentice*. Meaning Reiden was Feles Kura's teacher once upon a time, when the girl still lived.

Dad tied Reiden up and, after glancing at Sugol, the mechanized soldier who'd remained at Reiden's side the whole time, led the alchemist away.

I wondered where Dad was taking him, but I soon learned the answer.

"Tinaris!" I heard a voice I knew all too well. "Are you all right?!"

"Tina!" I heard another familiar voice.

"Lico!" I turned around to see her approach. "Nakona!"

"Oh, thank goodness you're safe!" Nakona said, catching me in a hug.

Over her shoulder, I could see an even larger group of people than the Edesa Kura refugees.

"The alliance army!" I looked to Lico, guessing who they might be, and she nodded.

"You going missing made the army march on Edesa Kura ahead of time. I'm glad you're safe," she said.

"S-So that's...?"

"No, that's just part of the first battalion that arrived first. It'll take a week for the main force to arrive. Well, not that it's necessary anymore," Lico said, looking at the drowned remains of Edesa Kura.

The soil was hollowed out, and the waves had swept entire buildings away. But then, a massive mass burst out of that black sea. Even from afar, I could see the glint of its golden eyes.

Wh-What is that?!

"Oh, Renne's going to clean this up. Just leave it to her," Curalius said behind us.

"Th-That's a Mythical?!" Nakona and I asked as one, our voices overlapping.

"Yes," Curalius said casually.

Wait, I know this Mythical!

This was the water dragon Renne, who guarded the seas between the human and Mythical continents. She was bigger than I imagined!

"Oh, by the way, adventurers that are regulars at the Rofola Lodge joined us too, saying they wanted to help rescue you," Lico told me.

"Huh? Adventurers?" I asked quizzically.

"You know, Aaron and his group?" Nakona appended.

"Ledo's group should be here soon, too," Shida said. "I used magic to come ahead of them."

Aaron's party, and Ledo and the others. They're all coming here just to help me...

I felt hot tears build up in my eyes.

"Really, I'm so glad you're safe," Nakona said. "But, well, looking at what's left of the place, I guess I ended up worrying for nothing!"

"Y-Yeah. The Mythicals really are amazing..." Lico agreed.

"Lico, I'm sorry, but could you join me? I'm handing Reiden over to the alliance army," Dad said.

"Oh, yes, sorry. You're right, let's go," she responded.

The two of them escorted Reiden over to the alliance army. He was, after all, Edesa Kura's highest-ranking alchemist in both name and substance. He was the creator of the mechanized soldiers, so he couldn't be left to his own devices.

But still, since he mentioned the automatic selling magic, I hoped we could work together once the war was over. As an alchemical apothecary, I had a lot I wanted to ask him.

"We'll help with transporting the captive Edesa Kura citizens, then," Curalius said. *"Renge, you make sure the Holy Woman is safely returned to Deshmel."*

"Yes, King Curalius," Renge said, and then frowned uncomfortably. "About Revi..."

"I'll leave him to you."

"I-If you say so..."

Curalius lifted her large body and glanced at the flustered people atop the hill. Come to think of it, Revi was nowhere to be seen.

Did he not come with them? I'd think he'd be the first to show up and wreak havoc.

For how curt Curalius was, I could only assume she was upset with him for stealing my Saint Elixir. But he only did it to save his mother, so I wished she wouldn't get too mad at him.

"Now, it's about time I fulfilled my role," Shida declared. "The role for which the Elf of the Sun is worshipped! Ahaha!"

"Oh, come on! Don't overexert yourself, Shida!" Nakona chided.

"I know, dear wife! Worry not, my love is yours alone! Ahahaha!"

"I swear, you always let things go to your head..." she mumbled in annoyance.

I chuckled as I watched them. I didn't know they had started caring about each other so much while I wasn't looking.

Aaron's group, Ledo's party, Curalius, and the other Mythicals...

I caused them all so much trouble by getting captured, but put another way, so many people were willing to help me in my greatest time of need. It was an amazing realization, and I could almost cry with gratitude.

"Leave cleaning up the mess to them and let's go back to Deshmel," Renge told me. "Or do you want to drop by Rofola first?"

"No, the people over at Deshmel are worried about me, I think. Ah, but I want to ask Reiden to help us develop the automatic selling device. Hm... Maybe we can say hello to the alliance army's people before we go?"

"Right, there's Aaron and the others, too... Gina was very worried about you, after all," Nakona said.

"That's true!" I nodded, thinking about the others.

"Right. That's right. We need to discuss this, too," Renge said, looking up at the sky covered by a boundless, black mass.

The Sugula. Even with the Kaguya gone and my power of the Stella present, it wasn't getting any smaller. It completely blotted out the sky as far as the eye could see.

"Renge, is this...?" Nakona asked, looking up with a frown.

"Yes. It's beginning its approach. We...don't have much time," he said.

“So soon...?!” I exclaimed.

“We need to discuss this, too. All the countries, all the races need to work together to overcome this cataclysm.”

I could only hold my breath wordlessly.



A day had passed since my rescue. I was in Deshmel’s war room, where an impressive situation was unfolding before my eyes.

“The Sugula’s beginning to fall?! What’s the meaning of this?!” a stout man, Dwarf King Regizof, shouted.

I always imagined dwarves as being half as tall as humans, but the king was larger (and louder) than the average dwarf. He was sitting on the other side of the table from me, but his voice still made my ears ring.

“Calm yourself, Dwarf King,” Elf King Gaelon said calmly.

He was the very image of a high elf; a handsome, tall man with blonde hair and blue eyes. He then shifted his gaze to a white-haired, old woman. This was Curalius in humanoid form.

“Renge, explain for them,” she said.

“Yes, King Curalius,” Renge responded with a nod. “It’s going to fall into the center of the human continent—meaning, this place. It’ll happen in two weeks. It’ll take ten days before it enters the range where I can destroy it.”

“What?!”

“T-Ten days...”

Panicked whispers filled the room. The representatives of the human countries went pale with terror. And I couldn’t blame them. Hearing that the Sugula was going to drop on this fort filled me with anxiety, too.

“Wh-What is the meaning of this, Marcus?!” one of Fei Lu’s major politicians raised his voice at Dad. “You said that monster in the sky would go away if the Holy Woman kept purifying monsters here!”

I couldn’t quite remember this man’s name, since there were so many people attending this emergency meeting that I had never met before. Dad and Renge tried to keep me as far from the politicians as possible over the years, and I appreciated it.

“Calm down, Lord Zabado,” Dad said. “When we investigated

Edesa Kura's ruins, we discovered something terrible. This." Dad placed what looked like a jar of jam on the table, except its contents were pitch black. The jar itself wasn't charred, though.



“What’s that? Bottled soot?” Zabado asked.

I cocked my head curiously too. I had no idea what was inside, either.

“Impossible,” Shida, who sat next to me, muttered. “Humans produced this?”

He was glaring at the jar with more disgust than I’d ever seen him display before. It seemed he knew what was contained within it.

Did he use appraisal magic?

I considered using it too, but the jar was too far away for me to see clearly. The war room was spacious, and there were about fifteen feet between my seat and Dad’s.

“Yes, it seems they made this thing,” Dad said gravely. “And it wasn’t made twenty years ago. The research behind it was done fifty years ago.”

“H-Hey, could you explain things more clearly?! What is this thing?!” Zabado shouted, tired of being ignored.

“Don’t shout, you bald geezer. Can’t you tell what it is just by looking?” Shida asked him coldly.

“Shida!” I scolded him.

That’s rude! I mean, he’s always rude, but still!

But then, I looked at the jar Dad was holding. “H-Huh...?” I gasped.

“Did you realize what it is?” Shida asked me.

“Y-Yes...” I whispered back.

The contents of the jar—was Camilla. I could sense it. It wasn’t purified despite being in proximity to me, so I assumed the jar was acting as a buffer somehow. Otherwise, it made no sense that Camilla wouldn’t be purified with the Stella right next to it.

“This is what’s called Camilla, converted into material form,” Dad explained to the room.

“What?!” several people shouted around the table.

“Camilla, in substance form?! That’s absurd!”

“Impossible!”

“How can that be?!”

The kings and representatives of the country all raised their voices in denial. The only ones to react differently were the representatives of De Marl—Rondered and Lico. They looked at the jar, grimacing. It seemed they knew about this beforehand.

“Camilla in material form...” I muttered in disbelief.

I always thought only Kaguya had physical form, but the possibility of Camilla being in material form astounded me. Why would anyone make this?

“We had Edesa Kura’s mechanical alchemist, Reiden Park, tell us all about it. Fifty years ago, the Edesa Kura king from two generations ago, Graulis Kura, discovered a stone slate and urn in the Lost Regalia ruins and took them back to Edesa Kura without the Uron clan’s approval,” Dad explained. “King Graulis was both an architect and an alchemist. And ironically enough, he ended up using his alchemy techniques to revive the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own. Ever since then, the king seemed to have gone mad and began engaging other countries in war. The next king, Sidore Kura, then took his place, and the wars increased in severity, and Edesa Kura greatly increased their domain. I’m sure you all know the rest.”

“Well, yes.” The various representatives nodded, their expressions sour.

“Much like King Graulis, King Sidore was an alchemist,” Dad continued. “Reiden testified that he taught him alchemy personally. King Sidore took over King Graulis’s research, which produced this material Camilla, as well as the glass container that would contain it and keep it from leaking outside. It was produced from enslaved citizens of countries defeated by Edesa Kura. As a result, however, many of them were afflicted with an incurable Severed Breath Syndrome.”

“What?!” I said under my breath.

Severed Breath Syndrome—that’s the disease Grandpa and Grandma had! They got it because of this thing?!

“Hm, it seems the glass jar is blocking out the Stella’s influence,” Shida pointed out.

“O-Oh! Yes, I suppose it is,” I said.

“Yes, come to think of it, it’s within the Stella’s effective range, but the Camilla inside the jar isn’t being purified,” Renge said. “So the material this jar is made of is capable of that...”

Indeed, the black mass inside the jar remained just as black. It occurred to me that the magic they used when I was captured and the metal coating Feles Kura’s body might have used the same principal.

Right, when the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own was born, Akari had already passed on. Grr, I can’t believe they misused alchemy to

make something like this! Do they value human life so little?!

“Are you saying this jar is canceling out the Holy Woman’s... the Stella’s power?!” the elven king asked.

“No, it’s not completely negating it, but it does manage to stave it off to some extent,” Shida said gravely, massaging his brows nervously. “I see, so the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own was using this materialized Camilla to continually mature the Sugula. How crafty...!”

It was releasing Camilla where my Stella couldn’t affect it, so no matter how many monsters I purified in Deshmel, I couldn’t do anything about this bottled-up Camilla.

That really was a brilliant play by the Kaguya. It really planned everything ahead of time.

“That’s the situation at present,” Dad said. “At least 20 percent of the people we rescued from Edesa Kura have Severed Breath Syndrome that we know of. Apparently, they were continually making these Camilla-filled jars within their country.”

“Tch... So that’s the cause of Severed Breath Syndrome?” Lico asked. “And the people made this Camilla, knowing that it did this to them?”

“Yes.”

“That’s terrible...” Lico hung her head.

Rondered wrapped an arm around Lico, tapping her shoulder comfortingly.

Wait, he’s being real casual about this, but should Rondered be touching her like that?!

“Now that we all understand the situation,” Curalius began, “let’s begin discussing the details in earnest.”

The representatives of each country and race grimaced and fixed their gazes on her.

“In two weeks, the Sugula will fall—plummeting straight toward Deshmel. Just like it did two thousand years ago,” she announced in a firm voice.

“T-Two thousand years ago...?” Fei Lu’s representative asked.

“Yes. I believe Marcus and Renge already told the humans and the demi-humans all about it. Two thousand years ago, the Sugula was created in this world and began looming over us. I am a dragon with powers of protection and healing, and so I hardly have any destructive capabilities,” she told them. “As such, I asked Renge, who governs over disasters and calamities, to destroy it for me. I’m

sure some of you saw what his powers are capable of. The only thing that can counter a calamity like the Sugula is another calamity beckoned by Renge.”

A few of the knights grimaced. All of the human countries’ VIPs had received reports about what had happened from the alliance army’s knights. They all looked away and swallowed nervously. The elf and dwarf kings both narrowed their eyes.

The power of disaster and calamity. Renge’s power. The story of what had happened two thousand years ago felt like a fairytale that was too distant to be real. Especially for me, since I knew how much Renge disliked fighting and hated nothing more than to take lives.

“But he failed to fully destroy the Sugula, and fragments of its body rained down all over the world as Kaguya,” Curalius continued. “The Kaguya consumed all living things and destroyed the planet’s surface. The Elf of the Sun, Leishi, cooperated with Renge, breaking the continent into three smaller ones. They sheltered the surviving races on the eastern and western continents, while Renge and Leishi gathered the Kaguya on the central continent and burned it all away. With that, only small amounts of Camilla and Kathra remained in the world, while the Kaguya and the Dwarf inside the Bottle were destroyed. The human and demi-humans left the eastern continent, with each of them taking root in one of the other landmasses, and the world began to recover. Now, the Sugula threatens to fall yet again. But unlike what happened two thousand years ago, we have a Holy Woman wielding the power of the Stella on our side.”

Curalius turned her wrinkly face toward me and smiled kindly.

“Ah...” I let out this surprised utterance.

The kings and representatives all fixed their eyes on me, too. I shrunk back timidly.

Aaaah, don’t stare at me...

“I-Is there anything I can do, King Curalius...?” I muttered.

“If nothing else, there’s no need to burn this world to the ground this time,” she replied. “If we try to burn the planet like we did last time, the Elf of the Sun’s mana will be depleted, and he will pass away. Just like Leishi did...”

“He’ll what?!” I gasped.

What’s this all about?! I turned to look at Shida, who simply folded his arms in front of his chest, his eyes closed. *He knew?!*

"The grimoire's power is limitless," he said. "But in exchange, using it is taxing for this young body of mine."

I stared at him in stunned silence.

"Don't worry about me! If need be, I'll use all my powers as this generation's Elf of the Sun. I inherited the grimoire from the great, olden king, and so I must rise to meet my duties!"

"Shida..." I muttered sadly.

Renge, who stood beside Curalius, cast down his gaze.

Was Shida willing to use the grimoire knowing that all this time? But, wait, I'm here right now, so it'll be fine, right? No matter how big the Kaguya that comes falling down might be, my Stella can purify it!

"I understand!" I said loudly. "If the Kaguya falls over the world, I'll go wherever it's needed to purify it!"

"Thank you," Curalius said. "You truly are a reliable Holy Woman. And I ask that you help her too, Elf of the Sun. With her help, there won't be any need to burn everything away. But still, we can't allow it to fall to the surface. Once it comes close enough, we'll have Renge destroy it."

"Right..." Renge said. "If we don't do that, it'll start eating away at the earth as soon as it can. We can't let that happen."

Eating away at the earth...

That was what the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own meant when it said the world would become one with it. It was madness. Since the Kaguya could "eat away" at anything, once it made contact with the earth, it could end up consuming the very world itself.

That's the one thing we can't allow.

"Still, the Mythical continent is too small to accept all of the human continent's denizens," Curalius said. "The demi-human continent must accommodate, too. That's the matter we must discuss. In ten days, Renge will destroy the Sugula just before things reach the point of no return. When that happens, the burnt, severed Kaguya will drop over a large area. And once it falls over this continent, all life, assets, and culture that exist here will be swept away."

"What?!"

"That's terrible...!"

"What are we supposed to do then?!"

The representatives of the human countries all cradled their heads with concern, their faces pale. To them, it was simply "horrible." But—

"N-No... Just ten days...?" Zabado said. "That's impossible! You're telling us to evacuate every human off our continent in a mere ten days?! And what are we to do after we evacuate?! The demi-humans' continent is populated by entire countries, and the Mythical continent has the Mythicals taking up residence there! The food won't last! What are we supposed to do?!"

"Lord Zabado..." Dad said, his voice and expression disappointed.

"You complain now, but this is why we asked Marcus to speak to the different countries over the past couple of years," Renge said, speaking up for my father and glaring at Zabado. "That's strange, surely you were listening to him. There's no chance that you ignored his warnings, is there?"

"Ugh!"

Most of the human continent's representatives looked away and kept their mouths shut. That was their answer.

"I'm shocked beyond words," Shida said loudly enough for everyone to hear as he leaned against his chair's backrest casually.

For three years, Dad traveled to all the different countries to inform them of the situation, but his warnings fell on deaf ears.

Oh, this is why big wigs are so frustrating...! I clenched my fists under the table, frustrated that my time apart from my father had gone to waste on these people who weren't even willing to make any concessions.

"There's not much to be done," Curalius said, her voice cutting through their myriad of complaints. "Humans are forgetful and vain. They act like the whole world's crisis is none of their concern. And now they panic, even though it's too late..."

"B-But still, King of the Mythicals...!" Zabado said. "I mean, put yourself in our shoes, being told that this *thing* floating in the sky for years would fall on us... Who would believe that?!"

"That's right! How were we supposed to believe that?! And we heard that the Holy Woman would purify it, so..." another human representative spoke up in agreement.

"Lord Zabado, Professor Ordes, haven't I been telling you to expect the worst possible situation could happen?" Dad asked them.

"Ugh..."

"Yes, but... I mean, still, that thing falling from the sky! It's unrealistic!" Professor Ordes argued.

This professor was a man of influence from Saikorea. He was

also a friend of Sirius and Jilril, a school headmaster who once invited me to study at his academy there. Jilril and Sirius weren't important enough politically to attend this war conference. But seeing a big player from a country of scholars bemoan about the situation in front of us being "unrealistic" was a little pathetic. It was a country that made the pursuit of knowledge its slogan, and Ordes was their representative... And yet, here he was, denying reality because it didn't fit into what he found acceptable.

"I see," Renge said tersely. "So you overlooked our warnings and advice on the basis of them being 'unrealistic.'"

"N-No, that's not what I meant..." Ordes stuttered.

"Tch! That's why humanssss are insufferable! Us lizardmen will never acccccept them into our denssss!" the lizardmen representative declared, his voice booming through the large room.

"The Ogres won't accept them, humans, either!" the ogre representative roared. "The elf, dwarf, and kobold countries are bigger, so you can go to them for help."

"What?!" Lord Zabado exclaimed, irked.

The lizardmen were unyielding, and the ogres thought of themselves as stronger than the other races. More than anything, they disliked mankind to begin with. Plus, their territories were relatively small. They were, however, located the closest to Fei Lu.

The heads of the three biggest demi-human countries all fell silent. Rondered and Lico looked around the table with pensive expressions. The one to speak up was the Saikorea representative, Ordes.

"O-Our country is geographically closest to the Mythical continent. King of the Mythicals, could your continent, well to put it simply, accommodate our people?"

"Yes, we could," Curalius nodded. "We will accept into our domain the people from the eastern side of your continent—Saikorea, De Luf, Yasha-Miz, and...hm, yes, Caro-De as well. That is as much as we can accept, however."

"O-Ooh, thank you!" Ordes stood up and bowed deeply to Curalius.

"Our country, too?! Thank you so much!" De Luf's queen rose from her chair and curtsied to Curalius as well.

"You have our gratitude, King of the Mythicals!" Yasha-Miz's leader said.

That's all the eastern and northern countries! That's very generous

of Curalius!

But that meant that the other countries...

"Very well. Forestria will accept the humans of De Marl. That country has been our ally for many years. What say you, comrade?" Elf King Gaelon said.

"Ah...! We greatly appreciate this kindness!" Rondered said.

"King Gaelon," Shida said, surprised by the elf king's generosity.

"You approve, yes, Shida?" King Gaelon asked him.

"It's not my place to object, but am I to assume my family is included in those numbers as well?" Shida asked carefully.

"Of course," King Gaelon said without an ounce of hesitation. "Your father and his comrades came to the demi-human continent to supply us with information. Tell them they are welcome when you see them next time."

"Hmph. I don't see them all that often..."

But for all of Shida's pouting, he did sit down for drinks with Sirius every so often at Rofola Lodge.

You really are a contrarian, Shida...

But I was relieved. De Marl's people and those living in the Rofola Lodge were guaranteed a place. The only problems remaining were the smaller countries and those living in roadside inns. There were also the people working in Deshmel to consider. Since the Sugula was plummeting directly on top of the fortress, they needed to be evacuated.

"E-Excuse me, what about the people working in Fort Deshmel —" I tried to bring the matter up, but a louder voice drowned my words out.

"Then what about Fei Lu?!" the Fei Lu representative asked. "We can evacuate to Segyadis... R-Right?!"

"No," the dwarven king shook his head. "I'm afraid not. De Marl is too large. Isn't that right, King Gaelon?"

"Yes, our country isn't large enough to accommodate all of De Marl's refugees," the elf king said.

"My country will take half of them," the dwarf king offered. "My apologies, but my country is limited in how many we can take in, and we also have deep ties with De Marl. You will have to depend on another race."

"I don't believe it..." the Fei Lu representative mumbled. "K-Kobold king, please...?"

“Oh, you want to come over to us?” the kobold king, a cat kobold called Zio, asked with a feline smile. “I’m sorry, but we already decided to take in merchants and traveling caravans.”

Merchants? People like Mister Giyaga?

“We will accept the traveling merchants and adventurers. They get along with us well, so we prefer that to an influx of strangers,” King Zio explained.

“B-But what... What are we supposed to do?!” the Fei Lu representative cried, despair washing over his features.

“P-Please wait!” another human country representative called out. “What is a small country like ours supposed to do?! Where will we go?”

“Th-That’s right! All you care about is the larger countries! Where are the people of our small country, De Lulua, supposed to run...?!”

“And don’t forget about the people of Ah-Demokis! P-Please, won’t someone offer our people shelter?! Somebody!”

The representatives shouted nonstop, but all sides were justified in trying to find a safe haven for their people. But the accommodating side could only take in so many people, and with the demi-humans having different cultures from humans, some were bound to refuse. Some races might have felt like they were too occupied with keeping themselves safe to be able to help.

Meanwhile, the people from the countries Curalius accepted started making demands. Protect us. Ensure we have enough food. And most importantly, don’t argue with us over differences in our culture.

Without cooperating and working together, people who used to live on different continents couldn’t hope to live side by side. That much was true.

But the people from Fei Lu and small countries like De Lulua and Uru Ki would end up having to bear the full brunt of the falling Kaguya’s impact. They needed somewhere to evacuate, or if nothing else, to get as far from Deshmel as they possibly could.

“What should the people in Deshmel do...?” I finally managed to ask. In a sense, I was their representative.

“There’s about a hundred people living in the fort, right?” Shida asked.

“Y-Yes.”

“Hm, in that case, they could just hide underground, beneath

the fort. This is where the Sugula is set to fall, but the olden king's friend will destroy the Sugula here as well. If worse comes to worst, this place will take the least damage."

He's right!

The Sugula was set to fall on Deshmel, but this was also where Renge would intercept it. In which case, the Kaguya would scatter, and very little of it would fall here.

So does that mean Deshmel's relatively safe, and I shouldn't worry about it? Really?

"What about food, though?" I brought up another concern.

"The fort is already self-sufficient as it is, no? And there's you, with the power of purification. The monster-attracting barrier is intact, too," Shida pointed out. "The fragmented Kaguya will rush to the fort, just like the monsters. And you'll deal with them as you have until now."

I fell silent. There were no other problems I could come up with.

"There's no preventing the fragments from falling everywhere, though," Shida continued. "The Sugula is just that massive, and even the olden king's friend wouldn't be able to fully burn it away with his flames. Those fragments are bound to rain on the human continent."

"Y-Yes..." I nodded anxiously.

"Fragments of significant mass will fall at great speeds over all the countries and farmland. You should have been preparing to take great losses. And despite all the warnings, you humans didn't make any preparations..."

"I did think three years might be too short a time..." Eure, who stood behind me, appended.

Shinsen nodded next to him. Shinsen was the one who worked with Dad for these last few years and helped him teleport around the continent, which gave his nod a slightly different meaning.

"How was the last time it fell, friend of the olden king?" Shida asked.

"Hm? Oh, sorry, I don't really remember. Things were very hectic back then, so it all feels like a blur now," Renge said apologetically.

"Hmm. Is that how it was for you?" Shida sounded a bit disappointed by his answer.

"I'm stronger than I was two thousand years ago, so the

surface area I'll be able to destroy should be larger," Renge said. "I do think I'll be more thorough this time around, but I don't think I'll be able to destroy all of it. There's still going to be Kaguya raining down."

"Well, I'll try to use my magic to burn down the bigger pieces as they fall," Shida said. "But since they'll be falling throughout the continent..."

"Yes, the Mythicals have the power to help, but there aren't enough of us to cover every single country on the human continent," Renge said.

Shida and Renge's conversation felt much more constructive than the country representatives', who simply insisted that someone shelter their people, the rest be damned.

Every single country... Oh, I know.

"Then how about people from countries like Fei Lu, Uru Ki, and De Lulua all evacuate to one spot, where you and the other Mythicals can protect them?" I suggested to Renge.

"Ah!" I heard a few people exclaim.

"...Wh-What? Did I say something strange?" I asked.

The whole room went quiet.

"Hm. It's possible, but if that's the case, I think Rofola might be the best option," Shida said. "It has a monster-repelling barrier, and me and the olden king's friend here could expand and reinforce it to a range that's about as large as De Marl. The Kaguya shouldn't be able to get in there. It's a fine idea, if I do say so myself."

Shida made it sound like it was his idea instead of mine.

"That works for the smaller countries, but what about Fei Lu?" I asked. "It's close to Rofola, but it's almost as big as De Marl. If we're going to gather the small countries' people in Rofola, where will Fei Lu's people go...?"

"Hmm, well..." Renge said pensively. "As for Fei Lu, we can use the leyline in Mount Jiera to set up a monster-repelling barrier there, too. Me and the Elf of the Sun can expand that one, too, so its effective radius extends to Fei Lu itself. It should keep the Kaguya at bay."

"O-Ooh!" the Fei Lu representative exclaimed, his eyes lighting up with hope. "Really?!"

"However," Renge cut him off. "The Kaguya falling from the sky is another matter. I'll have my hands full destroying the Sugula. The barriers in Rofola and Jiera will stave Kaguya off, but they

don't protect from physical impacts.”

“Yes, the barriers are only good for keeping Kaguya on the outside from getting in,” Shida said. “Anything that falls directly on you will have to be shot down with magic or by some other means...”

“Yes, the Sugula is currently sucking up Air from the world, even as we speak. Even with the leyline's help, magic and alchemical weaponry won't be as effective as they should be,” Renge appended.

Gasps filled the room.

“Correct...” Curalius said, opening her eyes. Her eyes were completely white. Even though she was doing better now, she could still hardly see. “Even so, it's the method that will result in the fewest lives lost. We don't have much time, and Renge will be busy destroying the Sugula. As such, I will dispatch the Elf of the Sun and my child, Revireus, to Rofola. As for Fei Lu, I ask that the demi-humans send magic users over to help safeguard the country. We must protect our own continents too.”

“Hmph...” the lizardmen representative harrumphed audibly.

“Are you mocking us?!” the ogre representative roared. “Why should we, the proud ogres, waste our precious resources protecting mere humans—”

Curalius cut him off with a silent stare, and then turned her eyes to me. Her expression softened; it was her usual, gentle gaze.

“This is a request from the King of the Mythicals, as well as the Holy Woman,” she said. “Will the ogres not be willing to listen?”

“Grr!” the ogre exclaimed.

“And what of you, lizardmen?” Curalius asked.

“Ah, w-well, the lizardmen will of course listen to you, King of the Mythicalsssss!” the lizardmen representative said meekly.

“Argh, I can't believe you, lizardmen!” the ogre representative cried out. “Cowards!”

“H-Hmph!” the lizardmen representative huffed at him. “You get what you deserve! Acting sssso prideful before both the ruler of the Mythicals and the Holy Woman!”

“Y-You're right, we must consider the Holy Woman's wishes, too,” the elven king said. “H-Hmm, very well, Forestria will dispatch skilled magic users for Fei Lu's defense.”

“H-Hey, we won't let you try to get away with making a show of your generosity in front of the Holy Woman,” the dwarf king

said. "My kingdom of Segyadis will dispatch our engineers to show off our technological might!"

Is it just me, or are all the demi-human representatives shooting me looks like a child trying to impress their mother?

"Mwahaha, the ruler of the Mythicals is wise indeed!" Revireus boasted. "She used the demi-humans' worship of the Holy Woman to convince them to do her bidding."

"That's King Curalius for you..." Renge said. "She's the only one capable of manipulating people into doing what she wants them to do while making them think it's actually what they want..."

"Ohoho, it's just the wisdom that comes with age," Curalius said with a modest laugh. "If anything, you should be the ones doing the convincing, boys."

"Ah!" Renge and Revireus both went quiet.

Wait, Revireus was here?!

I turned to look at him, wondering why he was so quiet, only to find his right eye was swollen and purple. His jaw also looked slightly dislocated.

Wh-What happened to him?!

"O-Oh, that?" Renge responded to my questioning gaze. "King Curalius bashed him. Revi was your guard, so she said him being away is why you got abducted..."

"N-No, that was because I was careless!" I objected.

"Also because he snatched the elixir you made and brought it to her..." Renge added.

"Well, I can't argue with that..."

I couldn't say that I was all right with what he did, but I also couldn't blame Revireus for acting like that given the situation he was in. He only did it because he cared for Curalius, so I couldn't believe she got that mad at him. And the fact no one had healed Revireus's injuries yet just went to show how much no one wanted to go against Curalius.

"Either way, the matter of the humans' evacuation is decided. We haven't much time, so we must act at once," Curalius said. "Renge, you focus on preserving your strength. Revireus! Eure! Shinsen! You lead the other Mythicals and help them transport the humans. Representatives of the human countries, you must relay what we agreed on here to your people as soon as possible! We only have ten days, after all. Marcus, you must go among the countries

and help them organize for the evacuation. Holy Woman, you stay here in Deshmel and continue purifying the monsters. Also, we need your approval to set up a transportation circle here. I'd like to hold any future meetings on our side."

"Y-Yes! Understood!" I said.

"As you wish, King of the Mythicals."



DESPITE the world being in a state of chaos, Deshmel was still peaceful. Even after hearing what we needed to do next, the people inside the fort seemed pretty laid back. They were mostly happy to have me nearby, though I personally didn't think my presence called for that much relief.

The representatives returned to their countries and began preparing for the evacuation. For large countries like De Marl and Saikorea, just the sheer number of civilians was an imposing issue. An entire country moving away would be a huge mess.

...Maybe I should have given them some stomach medicine.

After all, how long would it be until the Kaguya falls and everything settles down enough for them to return to their homes? Just that thought was enough to make one's stomach ache.

The Mythicals set up a transportation circle inside Deshmel, preparing for another meeting the next day. That meeting was for confirming the evacuation status and the situation in the countries preparing to accept the refugees. They would also discuss the state of food and supplies, and life after the Kaguya falls. There really was a lot to discuss.

Curalius spurred everyone on, telling them it was the last big push, and encouraged me by saying they'll make Deshmel untouchable. But that meant I was left out of all that work. True, I knew nothing of politics, but surely there was something I could do, right?



"**TINA**, do you have a minute?" Renge asked me in Fort Deshmel's corridor.

"What are you doing here, Renge?" I asked, surprised to see

him.

“...King Curalius told me to conserve my strength, and she’s basically leaving me out of all the work.”

“You too, huh?”

Renge really was at the heart of the plan this time around, since destroying the Sugula fell to him. And with less than ten days left, I was surprised either of us had any kind of time. I understood why they wanted us to conserve our energy, but still...

“I just wish there was something I could do,” I voiced my concerns.

“Hmm. Well, you could brew some medicine...ah!” Renge paused in realization. “Right, Tina, why don’t you make lots of mana restoratives? It’s harder to use magic with the Air of the earth being sucked away. If the mages and alchemists defending the continent can use them to replenish their Air, they’ll be able to fight at full strength.”

“Right! Renge, you’re a genius!” I exclaimed.

“I just wish I could help you with making them...” he said gloomily.

“Well, you’ll get the chance to help everyone in ten days. Just rest like Curalius told you to.”

“...I will.”

Now, time to do what I can!

Handling the evacuation with mass teleportation and other assorted methods was the bigwigs’ job. Lico and Dad looked like they were at their wits’ end, but they said they’d do what they could, so I was confident they’d pull it off. Renge said he was stronger than the last time and that he could destroy more of the Sugula this time. And we had Shida and Revi on our side, too!

We’ll be fine. I’m sure of it... I...hope. So I’ll just make mana restoratives for the moment of truth, ten days from now. Right now, this is probably all I can really do to help.

“But won’t they find out?” I asked.

“About what?” Renge blinked.

“I mean, if I keep making mana restoratives, won’t they find out I’m a Spherit Folk?”

“Oh...” Renge muttered in surprise.

Did he forget?

Just as I was about to enter my room, I turned around and looked up at Renge, who was trailing behind me.

"I think I'm all right even if they do find out now," I told him.

"You are? But—"

"I mean, even if someone goes after me because of that, you'll protect me, right?"

"...Well, yes...?" he said, sounding unsure, but I was confident he would.

He came to save me from Edesa Kura, and he'd do the same if something else were to happen to me. And why did he do that anyway? Was I important to him because I was the Holy Woman? I wished I could ask him, but I felt like if I did, whatever answer he gave would be a final, decisive one, and I was scared to find out.

"Oh, right... I still have to apologize to you about that," Renge said.

"About what?"

"...I'm sorry for letting them abduct you right under my nose."

I fell silent. It did weigh on him, even though it was my fault.

"It's all right, you made up for that by coming to save me," I said. "I mean, it's not like I paid you to guard me or anything..."

"But... That might be true, but I still said I'd protect you..."

Oh, no, he's getting depressed. Hmmm, how am I going to handle this...?

"Renge..." I came up with an idea. "Can we go to Mount Rofola's peak? Just for a little bit."

"Why?" He cocked his head at me.

"I just want to breathe some fresh air. Can we?"

When Edesa Kura abducted me, I only wanted one thing—to go back to Rofola. Given the situation, I felt like if I didn't go there now, I'd never get a chance to take another lungful of that clean air again.

"...Okay," he agreed. "I'm sure no one will find out if we're gone for ten minutes."

"Yeah."

Renge reached out his hand, and I wrapped my fingers around his. I felt a brief sensation of weightlessness, and in the blink of an eye, Deshmel's dry air gave way to a refreshing forest breeze. Before I knew it, the scenery around me changed from the fort's corridor to that of greenery.

"It's dark."

"Yeah..."

The place looked completely different from the last time we

came. A faint light was rising up from the mountain and climbing toward the sky. Those specks of light were Air, being sucked up from the earth by the Sugula. The lights were just barely visible. The world looked like it was blanketed by darkness, except the clear night sky that was usually visible from Rofola was nowhere to be seen.

This scenery I loved so much had changed entirely...

But even so, thanks to the faint light, it was still recognizable. We were by the well at the peak of Mount Rofola.

"The air's still as clean as ever. That's good," I said.

"...Yes, it is," Renge nodded.

We both took a deep breath. For both Renge and me, this was our childhood home. And yet, when we looked up at the sky, we could see demise visually approaching us. *How many times has it been that I've looked death in the eye like this since the day I was born in this world?*

...Death.

I had already experienced death once. I could remember it. Regardless of if my eyes were open or closed, the world was now pitch-black. Death is always closer than you know.

And if that's how it is—I...I don't want to die with regrets ever again.

The memory of the regrets I was left with from my past life spurred me to confront what I might regret in this life.

"Renge, I... I've always wanted to repay you for everything..." I said, breaking the peaceful silence between us.

"Hm?" He looked at me. "Didn't we settle that with the promise of chocolate...?"

"Well, hm, yes, that's what we agreed upon last time..." I mumbled.

Renge was a giant sweet tooth, after all. Once the spice field in Deshmel works out, maybe I can make him chocolate...wait, no!

"...You remember how I healed Dad's arm?" I asked, trying to get us off the subject of chocolate.

"Yeah?"

"And Lico's face, too. And I never really got to repay Elysis for everything she did for me, but I want to do that by becoming a great alchemical apothecary!" I declared.

"O-Okay?"

"So that just leaves you. You're the only one I haven't repaid

for everything yet!”

“Like I said, chocola—”

“Enough with the chocolates already!” I shouted.

Baking him stuff falls under my hobbies, anyway!

“...I want you to answer me truthfully,” I said seriously. “Can’t the Spherit Stone in my forehead...can’t it help you destroy the Sugula if it becomes a Stone of Daybreak?”

“What?!” he seemed taken aback by my question. “Well, I, hm...I don’t really know how it would help me, so...”

“...I see...”

So it’s a no-go...

I couldn’t come up with a good way to repay Renge for everything. He was just too selfless.

Well, Dad and Lico were pretty selfless in their own way, too...

But in their case, they had injuries that I could heal, which wasn’t the case with Renge. I didn’t know how I could make Renge happy. It was something I agonized over so much, and before I knew it, I realized I was gradually thinking more and more about him. And at the same time, I wanted to find a way to make good use of the Stone of Daybreak.

“...Tina,” Renge called my name.

“Hm?”

“Is the Stone of Daybreak...weighing on you?”

As he gazed straight at me, I had to look away. Both because having him look me in the eye was embarrassing, and because he was right.

If it wasn’t for the Stone of Daybreak, I’d be...

“Then I have an idea. If it is, then why don’t you make the Stone of Daybreak a vessel?”

“A vessel?”

“Remember how when Curalius held onto the Stella for Akari, she used her heart as a vessel so that it wouldn’t harm her?”

“...Oh, right. I remember that.” I nodded.

“When you decide to let go of the Stella, you can just use the Stone of Daybreak as a vessel to contain it. And you could hide the Stone of Daybreak here until that time comes.”

“Here?” I asked.

Renge pointed at the well. There was nothing at the bottom, and I could hide it there.

“And we just happened to get a glass jar capable of shutting off

the Stella's power," Renge said.

"You have it with you?!"

"It made me curious. I figured maybe we could use it to gather Kaguya and burn it all at once, so I figured I should hold on to it for experiments?"

He was right. If I placed the stone in the jar and buried it at the bottom of the well, no one would ever discover it.

"That said, I don't think you can let go of the Stella that easily, but having that as an option puts you at peace, right?"

"Yeah, you're right... Yeah!" I said.

I never considered relinquishing the Stella. And I didn't quite realize it before, but this was where Renge's home used to be. Where his mother, Akari, used to live with him.

"Wait... So the well Keria threw his Elixir of Life into was this one...?" I pondered.

"Yes, it was right here. He said Mother's words made him realize the truth...that all life..."

All life has an end. That was the lesson Akari imparted to Renge and Keria.

Right here, at this very place. That all life...

"Someday, I, too..." I murmured, looking up.

I was met with Renge's gaze as he looked down at me. Renge's father was a Mythical who was not of this world. And so, Renge...

"Yes," he said. "Someday, you'll pass away too. And when you do, I want you to leave the Stella in this world, for the next Holy Woman...just like my mother did."

"...Renge, are you going to protect the next Holy Woman, too?" I asked.

"I will... So that the world can go on."

"Because Lady Akari loved this world?"

"Yes."

"Renge, do you love this world?"

This time he didn't answer immediately.

Oh, you bothersome man. If you make that sad face of yours, I—

"Well, I love this world." I brought my hands together and pressed my lips against them in prayer. For some reason, I really felt like crying.

Renge's so...lonely...

The way he acted reminded me of my grandmother, Elysis. He's protecting the world because someone else loved it, and in the

process of doing that, he always gets himself hurt.

That's no good. I can't accept that. I can't bear to think you'll spend the rest of your life all alone.

"So I want you to protect the next Holy Woman too, Renge," I said.

"...Tina..."

"And I want you to say loud and clear that you love this world."

"...I...I can't..." He shook his head.

I closed my eyes. I got the feeling the Air around the peak was thicker than before. When I opened my eyes, I found the Air rising from the ground increased in density. Specks of light danced. It felt like the Air was trying to urge me forward. And while I might have imagined it, I felt like Akari was spurring me on, too.

"B-Because, I love you Renge... I love you more than anyone else... So I want you to love this world, and I want our...well, I don't know if it'll be our children, or grandchildren, or maybe their grandchildren...but I want the next Holy Woman to be one of them. So please, protect this world's future. With me..."

I looked up, finding that Renge was watching me with wide eyes. I felt a warm lump fill my throat.

Don't give up here. No, just say it. This is my wish. But...

"Please marry me!" I proposed.



Renge was speechless. Or at least, that was the impression I got. As soon as I said the words, my face got so hot I felt like I might explode, and I felt tears run down my cheeks. I covered my face, wiping the tears with my sleeve.

I-I said it. I really said it. No, I did think I didn't want to say nothing and then regret it! This is just so I can be satisfied with myself! So, even if—

“...All right.”

...Huh?

“...You, what?” I muttered.

“Ah, erm, uh...”

Oh. Renge's blushing.

Wait, of course he's blushing! I just proposed to him! Just like Shida did to Nakona. Though I guess I wasn't that pompous. I think! Aaaah! Ababababa!

“E-Erm... Wait a second...wh-what?” he asked.

My legs started shaking.

Gosh, I wanna go home...! Let me shut myself off in my room and never get out of bed! Oh, I wish I could bury myself! Actually, I have a well right here, maybe I'll just dive in there! It's a pretty big well! Ooh, I don't mind if you say no, just let me go home, so I don't have to look you in the eye again!

“T-Tina, you want to...?” he asked.

“Nnnng!” I was too embarrassed to talk.

“...E-Erm, it's just...my age... Despite how I look, I'm over 3,000 years old. I'm like an old man, in human terms!”

“With how you look, those...e-excuses won't work. Plus, I'm not human anyway! Don't place human expectations on the way I live.”

“How I look...?”

“I-It's just, if you can't see me romantically, just tell me and get it over with!” I said in self-abandonment.

Just make it a clean break and turn me down!

“I...erm, I do see you...that way...”

“You do...?” I felt my jaw drop.

“It's just that...my personality. I'm like this, and all I'm good for is destroying things, and I can't protect anything. I'm gloomy, and I don't have any hobbies or friends! I've never been romantic with any girl, and I don't have the first idea about how to go about

it, either. There's nothing about me that you'd...I-like. Marrying me won't be fun, and I don't even know how to be in a relationship. You'd be better off with someone else for sure, so I feel like I should turn you down. But if I turned you down, you'd get hurt, and if I don't reject you, we'd have to get into a relationship...and if you marry me, you'd just—"

H-He's so negative...! As negative as I was in my past life! I get how he feels, though!

"I-It's not like I've ever had a boyfriend before, either!" I admitted.

"Th-Then that's all the more reason you shouldn't have me be your first boyfriend..."

"But you're the one I fell for. A-And, well, we can figure out what we're supposed to do as a couple later!"

"E-Erm, uh, yeah...?"

"J-Just tell me...how you feel about me!" I shouted.

...What the heck am I saying?! Wouldn't it be easier to just back down?! He already pretty much turned me down. Why did I ask him that?! Why can't I stop myself?!

"I-I love you!" Renge shouted back.

Huh?! Eh? What? Wait, really?

"Y-You do...?" I asked.

"I mean, if I had to choose between whether I love or hate you..."

"Oh... You mean it like that..." I felt the wind go out of my sails.

So it's not like that... I guess he doesn't see me as a girl. I suppose he loves me as a friend...or like, a little sister?

"...N-No, I didn't mean that," Renge suddenly said.

"No?"

"When I see you talking to other men, it...it makes me want to burn that man to a crisp."

"...What?"

"I'm okay when you talk to Marcus, but..." Renge said, turning dejected. "When I see the Elf of the Sun or the other workers in Deshmel talk to you, it makes the pit of my stomach simmer..."

Is it just me, or did he say something really crazy just now?

"It makes me want to reduce them to ashes...and I don't feel that way with other people..."

"R-R-R-R-Really..."

That's a pretty absurd thing to say. E-Erm, but, wait, does this mean...?

"A-Are you saying that you were, hm, that you were j-jealous?"

"I-I think...?"

"Then, hm..."

I did feel like his degree of jealousy was a bit excessive, but him being jealous meant that he was interested in me as a girl. And that did make me feel a bit giddy.

Can I really think that? That Renge really...feels that way about me?

"But are you sure you want me?" Renge asked. "I mean, I'm a Mythical, and you're a demi-human. Our lifespans are different..."

Huh? Wait, is he being bashful? Why is he being so shy about it?

"My lifespan... You mean, I'll pass away before you do, right? But, hm... I want to...try having a family together...to have kids with you..."

"Aah..." Renge's mouth fell open.

I felt my face go red.

Aaaaaah, what did I just say to him?! How could I say something like that?! B-But, it's just...

"I-If we have kids together, you'll have a family! And then, you won't be lonely anymore!"

Renge's eyes widened in disbelief.

"A-And, I won't be your only family! If you marry me, Dad will be your father-in-law, and Nakona will be your sister-in-law, and René and Moné will be your little siblings-in-law!"

Renge remained speechless.

"So, um..."

Gosh, this is no good. I can't even look you in the face. But still, ever since that day sixteen years ago, when you saved me, you've always reached out to help me. So this time...

"Let's...live together," I said.

His eyes went wide and his brow furrowed. I couldn't see half of his face over his scarf, but his emotions and feelings were visible just from his eyes. He gripped my extended hand, clenching back.

"...Let's live together. You, and me," he said, and drew his face closer to mine.

Renge's face was approaching me—and I could feel my own face burn up. But I didn't want to run. Not now... So I closed my

eyes. His forehead pressed against the circlet on mine.

Huh? This...isn't a kiss?

But then, Renge's eyes widened in surprise, and I—

“Ah!”

My forehead burned with heat. At first, I was disappointed he didn't kiss me, but the sudden heat made me stagger and step away from him, ruining the moment. The heat became painful.

“O-Ow...” I moaned.

“Tina!”

What?! What's going on?!

The circlet clattered to the ground, the Pact Stone inserted into its center missing. And in its place, my forehead erupted with pain.

Ah, wait, it feels like my head's...cracking?! And it's glowing...!

“Ah...!” Renge exclaimed as he looked at my forehead. “M-My true name is Renge, heir to the Mythical bloodline of the Cerberi! Faced with this girl's contract, I consent!”

“Huh...?”

When Renge said that, I felt the heat and pain in my forehead recede.

Wh-What was that?

“Ugh...” I felt myself stagger and falter.

“Are you all right?” Renge caught my body, and I somehow managed to stay on my feet.

What just happened...?

“What happened to me...?” I asked.

“...Look at this,” Renge said, sitting me down on the edge of the well.

Sitting in his palm was a reddish stone, as well as a faint purple stone that was severed into two.

Huh? What's this? A red...red stone? Is this—

“The red one is the Stone of Daybreak,” Renge said.

“Eep!” I screeched.

“And the purple stones are the Pact Stone. I can hardly believe it, but it regained its glow.”

“The Pact Stone being the stone that was in the ark I was floated down the river in, right?” I guessed.

“Right.”

When I was smuggled away from Jiera, my real father placed this cold, gray stone in my ark. Renge called it a Pact Stone. I checked my circlet but found that the Pact Stone Renge had once

inserted into it was gone now.

So this purple stone is the Pact Stone that was in my ark? But it went from being gray to purple. What happened?

"It's warm..." I touched it gingerly.

"...It's because its pact was overwritten," Renge said.

"Overwritten?"

"This is amazing... Are Spherit Folk really capable of this?"

"Of what?"

It felt like Renge was piecing everything together, but I wished he'd explain it in a way I could understand too.

"I'll place the Stone of Daybreak in the jar and hide it in the well. All right?" Renge asked me.

"Y-Yeah. Go ahead. But what does the...Pact Stone mean?" I asked, a bit anxiously.

"Er..."

Huh? Is Renge being bashful?

"It's just, um... I think this Pact Stone was the one your parents used."

"You mean, my real mother and father?"

"Yes, your real parents...I think this was the Stone of Daybreak that was produced from their marriage."

"Ah..."

The Stone of Daybreak I was making right now was elliptical, while my parents' Pact Stone was round. Yes, the one in my forehead was elliptical, but was the gray stone I had on me all this time really my true parents' Stone of Daybreak?

"The Stone of Daybreak can only be produced once in a Spherit Folk's lifetime. When it grants their wish, the stone loses its glow. I don't know what your parents wished for from this stone, but it lost its color..."

I fell silent.

"But you will survive."

"You must live on."

For some reason, I remembered those words clearly and vividly. That was the wish my parents made, the wish that made their Stone of Daybreak lose its glow.

"It must have been some kind of shared pact they made by swearing their love to each other," Renge said pensively. "Aah, I'd forgotten... Yes, my mother and father also..."

“Your parents...?”

“Yes, their oath of love took the form of a Pact Stone. And when my mother died, the stone lost its color, and my father took it with him when he left this world.”

I hung my head wordlessly.

“The Stone of Daybreak was always a type of Pact Stone,” Renge concluded.

A stone born of an oath of love.

But wasn't it said that they could be made from a Spherit Folk's emotions becoming elated?

“No...”

That's not right. That stone is only made when you have someone that can make you feel this way.

And in that regard, it really was a Pact Stone. The Stone of Daybreak would never come to be if we didn't long for someone that intensely.

“So, does that mean that...if you and I made that oath, the Spherit Stone in my forehead is a Stone of Daybreak now?” I asked, a little scared.

“No, the Spherit Stone is still embedded in your forehead.”

“It is? Ah, it is!” I touched my forehead.

I can feel it, the stone really is there! But I thought this would make me like a normal human now... Well, I guess I'd never be normal with my ears and lifespan...

“It's created from the Spherit Stones, so it makes sense it would stay there,” Renge said.

“Aww...”

“If anything, I'm surprised. That was the remains of your parents' Stone of Daybreak, but because you and I entered a union pact, it regained its function as a Spherit Stone. That's impressive.”

“What's a union pact?” I asked.

“A promise to share our lives together.”

“Ah...” My face became very hot.

Renge's cheeks looked a bit red, too.

“Normally, this pact implies that we both need each other to live on, but, well, forming the pact based on this is a little, hm...” he mumbled.

“R-Really... S-So, um, does the pact...have some kind of power to it?”

“...Well, yes, normally a union pact stone allows us to share

some of our abilities—” Renge then trailed off.

“Renge?” I asked.

He froze up, his expression stiffening. Why would he be so surprised when he’s explaining it?”

“Right, why didn’t I think of it before...? A pact stone... A Joint Struggle Pact!” he exclaimed.

“What?”

“But with this pact, it’s... Tina!”

“Y-Yes?!” I asked, alarmed.

He grabbed me by the shoulders and brought his face close to mine.

“We can beat it!” he said. “I think we might be able to destroy the Sugula! And we can do it without anyone dying or blighting the planet! You and I, we might be able to do it...!”

“Seriously?!”



TEN days passed by before I knew it.

“It’s finally time.”

Dad had hurried back to Deshmel. Nakona wanted to come over, too, but someone had to stay with René and Moné, so she stayed at Rofola with them. Deshmel was said to be the safest place in the world, but there was no telling what might happen. Of course, I was confident Renge would pull it off, and I intended to help him in any way I could. But even so, it wasn’t worth risking the kids.

At this point, the glowing specks of Air weren’t rising from the ground anymore. Today was definitely the end of the line. We had the barriers set up over Rofola and Fei Lu. Revireus, Shida, Eure, Shinsen, and the other Mythicals were all on the ready to destroy any Kaguya that might come falling down.

Apparently, the evacuation of the various countries wasn’t completely finished yet. Moving tens of thousands of people to other continents in just ten days was impossible. And there were people living self-sufficiently on this continent without being part of any country. Finding all of them was a difficult task.

Even if they realized something bad was happening to our world, making the trek to one of the countries was too dangerous.

With the Sugula's fast approach, more monsters kept appearing.

But today, we'll be getting rid of this black sky! For sure!

"We're almost at our limit. It's time," Renge said.

"We're counting on you, Renge," Dad said.

Renge nodded silently.

We were in front of the fort's entrance. Me, Dad, Deshmel's employees...and everyone in this world. All of our expectations lay squarely on Renge's shoulders.

"I'll do what I can...and Tina, you'll help me, right?" Renge said to me.

"Yeah. Go on..." I wasn't sure what else to say now. But after a moment's thought... "Let's both do our best!"

"...Yes!" Renge nodded firmly, seemingly happy with my parting words.

Renge floated up into the air, and suddenly removed his scarf. The scarf he always wore flapped, its full-length coiling around his body and changing shape.

A white...mantle?

It looked familiar, like a strange, Japanese battle surcoat.

What's that...?



"This is Renge's true human form..."

"It's my first time seeing it..."

I heard two familiar voices behind me.

"Jiril, Mirage!"

They were both visibly surprised. Apparently, the way Renge looked now was different from before.

Is it really just because he took off his scarf?

"His original human form? You mean, this?" I pointed up at him.

"That's riiiiight. You've never seen Renge without his scarf, have yooooou?"

"R-Right."

"We haven't either, hm, but Eure told me about it once. That scarf serves as a limiter because Renge is too strong. He uses it to seal his true form."

"He does...?"

"What...?"

Dad and I both went pale.

All the power he showed off until now was him holding back...? When he defeated that army on the Caralus Plains or defeated Feles when she was merged with the castle, that was him with his power inhibited...?

"That's right," someone answered, making us jolt.

"Really?!" we turned to look.

It was Renge himself. Not just us, all of Deshmel's people were surprised.

"My father was a Cerberus. Cerberi are considered pureblooded sovereign beasts, and my father was considered especially talented. He was far stronger than this world's standard. And since my power is too focused on destruction, I have to keep it suppressed so it doesn't pose a threat to all life in this world."

"Whoa..."

"You were that strong?!" Dad asked.

"I could even influence Air itself. Right now, the Sugula sucked up all the Air so it doesn't matter, but normally the mana produced in my body can influence the Air's purity."

It can do what?!

"So this is probably the last time I'll ever take on this form."

I hung my head quietly. He was going to use the black flames

that destroy matter down to its very concept, to make sure the Sugula could never be created again. This was something he wasn't able to do before.

But now, Renge could do it.

I nodded, and Renge smiled at me.

"Good luck!" I told him resolutely.

"I'll be back soon."

Renge took to the sky, his pure-white visage soon disappearing from sight. I brought my hands together and held them over my chest in prayer. Clenched in my palm was my and Renge's Pact Stone. The crystallization of my parents' love.

"Air, the one and only God in this world, please have mercy upon our lives," I whispered time and again, hoping my words reached the powers that be.

When I closed my eyes, I could see the same scenery as Renge.

This is strange...is this the pact's power, too? It's like we're flying together...

He wasn't looking down, so I wasn't scared, and I couldn't tell if he was flying too fast, either.

"There," I heard Renge's whisper in my head.

I could see it. A vast, pitch-black darkness, and something writhing within it.

"Let's go, Tina. Together. Hell Flame—Concept Erasure!"

Yes, I'll pray, too. I'll pray for your safe return. For the world to live on. For the Sugula...to be purified. Air, the one and only God in this world, please have mercy upon our lives...

I poured the power of the Stella into our Pact Stone. I could sense Renge's appearance and voice because we were connected through our Pact Stone. And that link was something we could use.

So that you and me can live together in this world...!

Me and Renge united our powers, so that we might both purify the Sugula and destroy its very concept.

Please, work...!

A flash of light blinded me. The world was awash with white, and at its center, I could see someone smile.

Are you...Air?

The figure didn't answer me. Maybe they didn't hear me. As my eyes got used to the light, I could see a field of flowers. And standing at its center was a black-haired man.

"The Sugula is disappearing!" I heard Dad call out.

I gasped and looked up at the sky, and my mouth fell open. The night sky was strewn with glittering stars. *How long has it been since I last saw the night sky...?*

The Sugula didn't rain down on us.

"...It worked," Dad muttered.

"The sky! I can see the night sky!"

"W-Woow! The Sugula's disappearing! It's being purified!"

"He did it! He did it, we're saved!"

"Look! It worked! Renge managed to relay the Holy Woman's Stella! The Sugula's vanishing!"

Everyone cheered. Large hands wrapped around me from the flank and pulled me into a big bear hug.

"You did it! Oh, Tina, you really did it!"

"Y-Yeah!" I said, entrusting myself to Dad's arms.

All around the world, people were cheering in elation. I could almost hear it when I closed my eyes.

Oh, thank goodness...!

"Whoa?!" Dad exclaimed as I went limp in his arms.

"O-Oh, sorry... I guess the relief just made all the tension drain from my body..." I mumbled.

"Oh, I see... Right, you've been nervous all morning. You can rest now, Tina. Because tomorrow, things are going to get a bit messy."

"Y-Yeah, I will... But, I need to wait for Renge..."

But before I could finish that sentence, my body floated up. A pair of hands picked me up under my shoulder and knees in a princess-style embrace, and a warmth enveloped me. It wasn't Dad.

"Renge!" I exclaimed happily.

"It worked," he said plainly.

"Yeah, I saw it...! Welcome back."

"I'm home...!"

Renge smiled at me, his face unobstructed by his scarf. I reached out and wrapped my arms around his neck. I was so excited I didn't even realize what I'd done, and only a little later did the embarrassment settle in.

But maybe it was because of this elation...

I realized that I was called into this world...so I could experience this moment.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Side Story: The Mercenary's Tale

IN this world called Wisty Air, multiple countries exist, with their borders separated by uninviting walls. If one wishes to enter a different country, they have to traverse roads where monsters prowl and then hope to be let in through the gates.

I, Garfel, worked as a mercenary with my two comrades, Otto and Rigal. The three of us joined the army of an alliance of countries led by De Marl, meant to oppose the country Edesa Kura.

At some point...three years ago, all the monsters around the world started growing in size and strength. At first, the merchants who'd hired us as guards remained stout-hearted, and despite the monsters being stronger, we were still capable of dealing with them. But there was another change in this world that we soon came to notice.

The black dot.

A small black dot had appeared in the sky and began growing bigger by the day. No one knew what it meant, and time went by without any explanation for it. A year later, it became so large it was easy to spot it in the sky. After two years, it occupied a full section of the sky. And three years after it had appeared, it blotted out the sky entirely.

It was around that time that rumors of the Holy Woman started cropping up all over the place. People said she lived in a place called Deshmel, at the world's navel, where she used a monster-attracting barrier to draw in and then purify monsters from all around the world.

Yes, she *purified* monsters. She didn't defeat them, but purified—in other words, erased them. Monsters were seen as undefeatable and unkillable, but she found a way to dispose of them. I couldn't believe it.

"Hey, Garfel, we just got a new request for a job!" Otto called out to me.

"Oh?" I responded.

"Another merchant's asking for bodyguards, but they're

looking to go to Deshmel. The pay's good, but do we take it...?" Rigal explained as he and Otto came up to me.

"Wait, what? That's the spot where all the monsters are!" I said. "You said the pay is good; how good are we talking here?"

Depending on the pay, we could equip ourselves differently. Still, going to Deshmel with just three people felt like a tall order. With that thought in mind, I checked the request form...only for my eyeballs to almost pop out of their sockets. This merchant was offering three times the market value!

"The client said they'd like us to hire any other mercs we know who'd take the job alongside us," Rigal explained.

"So that's why they're offering to pay so much," I said. "Just looking at those numbers almost gave me a heart attack."

"Well, it's a dangerous destination," Rigal said. "Trust me, the pay had me shocked too, but apparently, since this caravan supplies gear to a few countries, they pitched in to add a bonus. Apparently this Deshmel place is where the Holy Woman lives."

"Wow..." I hummed.

The Holy Woman—apparently, folks over at the demi-human continent worshipped her. People over here on the human continent worshipped their various guardian gods instead, but recently, even people in human countries were starting to convert to believing in her.

Apparently, humans' faith in anything except Air and the Holy Woman created Kathra, which evolved into Camilla. And the monsters around the world consumed this Kathra, which was what made them grow in size. And then there was that gigantic black mass in the sky.

The way things were going, Wisty Air itself would end up being swallowed whole by that black mass. I didn't know if that story was true, but Mythical Beasts came all the way from the Mythical continent to warn humans about it.

And that was an alarming development, since the Mythicals had never interfered with humans before. Anyone who's ever traveled to the Mythical continent could attest to how unusual that was.

I've actually been to the Mythical continent three times myself. The people of that continent were fundamentally indifferent toward humans. To them, we were creatures who would pass away before their hair grew out. For all the Mythical Beasts were concerned,

they wouldn't budge unless the world was in mortal danger.

So the fact they decided to act felt like all the proof I needed to believe the rumors that the black mass in the sky was about to swallow up Wisty Air.

And apparently, the Mythical continent had also acknowledged the Holy Woman who'd set up base in Deshmel. And bringing supplies to that Holy Woman was the job we were currently being offered.

"Let's take it," I said, handing the job request Rigal had handed me over to Otto. "It'll be an interesting job, that's for sure!"

"Agreed," Otto said. "If both the demi-human and Mythical continents acknowledge this Holy Woman, we've got no choice but to admit she's the real deal."

"You think all the stories about her are real?" Rigal asked.

Apparently, he wasn't ready to believe yet. Otto simply said that finding that out is part of what'll make this request interesting. As for me, I felt that if this Holy Woman really could purify the monsters, she was worth believing in.

And so, we took the job. We called in a few other mercs we knew, forming a group of ten. We got our gear in order and prepared more food and water than usual for the trip. And so, our escort mission began.

Our client, Giyaga, was a fairly famous traveling merchant. With the monsters becoming more active, smaller caravans that couldn't afford guards had to put their business on hold. But Giyaga had a caravan of three large carriages, and he received support from the countries he dealt with, allowing him to continue his business.

He was apparently a very brave merchant, too, who supported the livelihoods of the farms and inns that dotted the land between the different countries.



"WE'VE got monsters coming!"

"We'll stall them! Get the carriage to Deshmel, now!"

"Sorry we've got to leave you behind...we're counting on you!"

"Dammit, there's more of them than I thought! I guess it makes

sense, we're near the monster-attracting barrier..."

We left five men to guard the carriage while our team of three and another team of two mercenaries moved in to stall the monsters. Defeating monsters made Kathra scatter into the air, making both those who defeated those monsters and the nearby plant life turn into monsters, too. So to that end, we weren't allowed to defeat the monsters. Our only option was to land blows that wouldn't be fatal. But when we were up against giant, oversized monsters, we couldn't very well afford to be that careful, and had to keep attacking to stay alive.

Needless to say, it was taxing on our nerves. But we had to do it. This was our job, after all.

"Grrrrrrrrrrrr!" a monster howled at us.

"Good, they're running!"

"Now, let's get back to the carriage!"

"Right!"

Having confirmed the monsters were fleeing, we boarded our carriage again. Such attacks happened several times along the way as we tried to safely deliver the merchants to their destination.

But the road to Deshmel proved difficult. There were many monsters—too many.

"More monsters!"

"Dammit, there's a zombie coming, too!"

"Wait, I didn't sign up for this! It's too big!"

Zombies were humans that turned into monsters, but the one we were facing was too large. It stood thirty feet tall and used its long arm, which dangled near the ground, to attack. But its blind flailing sent a few large-beast-like monsters that charged at us flying.

It hitting the other monsters was helpful, but zombies were tricky to beat. The only way to defeat them would be to cut their tendons to stop them from moving, but that wouldn't kill the thing, and it would eventually start moving again. However, with the zombie closing in on us and swinging its arm every which way, we didn't have time to overthink things. At this rate, we were bound to lose.

"Rigal, I'll move in! Cover for me!" I shouted.

"Are you serious, Garfel?! It's too dangerous!"

"We don't have a choice! We'll get exhausted sooner or later! Please, cover for me!"

“Dammit, fine! Just don’t die on me!”

I had faith in my comrades, and I was confident we’d be fine. With that thought, I watched my friends use their techniques to close in on the zombie, slipping by its arm. I slashed its left leg’s tendon, and the moment the zombie toppled over, I pulled away.

Everything went well, as always—

“Aaaaaaaaah!” I heard the zombie roar.

“What the?!” I exclaimed.

“Garfel!” Rigal yelled.

Any zombie I’d fought before would’ve been defeated by this attack, but in the end, zombies were smarter than any normal monster that was made up of minerals or animals. It thrust its left arm into the ground, guarding its leg, and used its right hand to grab me by the ankle.

Are you joking?! Each of its fingers is as big as my leg! If this thing gets a solid grip on me...!

I heard the zombie growl as it tightened its grip on me.

“Nngh, aaaaaaaaah!” I screamed in pain.

I heard my comrades call my name, and much to my frustration, the last thing I could see was how the zombie narrowed its eyes with a vicious smirk—



I had a dream. A dream of when De Marl and the alliance first fought Edesa Kura. As a mercenary, I was sent out to the front lines. I was part of a platoon that had mercenaries mixed in with members of the Azure Knights, and I was led by a certain high-ranking knight.

His name was Marcus Ril. He was strong, and his heroics on the battlefield were major enough that the mercs called him De Marl’s Blue Demon Wolf. I also heard he’d retired after losing his left arm...

At first, I asked myself why I had that dream, but the reason soon made itself apparent.

My leg was as good as his arm now...

“Garfel, hold on!” Otto desperately called out to me. “We’ll be at Deshmel soon!”

“The Holy Woman is there! She’ll definitely save you!” Rigal

assured me. "So don't give up!"

Otto... Rigal...

I could only stare on in silence. I could feel tremors beneath me. We were probably on a carriage, and it was running fast. Were they hurrying for my sake? And why were they panicking so much? What happened to my lower half? Was I missing just one leg, or were both of them gone?

...My mercenary career is over.

I realized that even if I survive, I'd be chair-bound. I started contemplating which country I'd live in. Thinking I wouldn't be able to fool around with my comrades again made me feel forlorn and wistful. Because I still wanted to live. I still—



"**THIS** is a high-grade tonic! Have him drink it!" a girl said.

"Thank you!"

"Garfel, drink this! Garfel!"

"Ugh, nn... Ngh..." I obeyed the fragmentary voices I heard, gulping down the liquid they poured into my mouth.

It was faintly sweet. But then I realized I recognized this flavor. It was a healing tonic, but sweeter. I'd never even had a high-grade tonic that was this sweet before.

"Garfel! Garfel, hold on!"

"Calm down," a female voice I didn't recognize told them calmly. "His wounds are healing. His stamina is being used up to heal his wounds, so let him rest for now. Everyone, there's a dining hall on the second floor. You can eat there, and then rest in your rooms. We'll have him taken to the infirmary."

"Th-Thank you! Thank you so much, Holy Woman!"

"Oh, thank goodness... Garfel, you're gonna be all right... Just rest a bit. We'll see you tomorrow!"

I heard Rigal and Otto's relieved voices, and then a girl's voice. The tension in the air seemed to give way to warm relief. After that, I fell asleep.



"N-NNGH..." I stirred.

When I woke up, I was in a small room, sectioned off with a white curtain. Sitting next to me were my two friends and a blond girl with red eyes.

“Oh, he’s waking up,” the girl said.

“Oh, Garfel!”

“Garfel! You’re awake! Oh, thank goodness, you’ve been asleep for three days!”

“Th-Three days?!” I asked in shock, my voice hoarse. “What happened to— Agh?!” I cried out in pain.

“Don’t try to get up yet.” The girl pushed me down into the bed gently. “When recovering lost limbs, there’s occasionally some pain left over. I suppose a high-grade tonic can’t heal it entirely...”

From the girl’s serene expression, I could instinctively tell this was the Holy Woman. The girl raised a hand over my foot and chanted, “Pure light of the Holy Star, lend your ear to my prayer and grant me your sacred glow. Photon Healing.”

This is healing magic!

People who can use magic were hard to come by as it was, and healing magic was even rarer. And she was able to use it to such great effect!

“O-Oooh...” I exclaimed in disbelief.

“Is the pain dying down?” she asked.

“Y-Yes... It doesn’t hurt.” I tried moving my leg, and the dull pain from earlier was gone. “Wh-What happened to my leg?” I asked.

“A zombie crushed and tore them off... Both of them,” she said grimly.

“Aaah...” Shivers ran through me.

Otto and Rigal stopped the bleeding, but apparently, a major artery in my thigh was torn. I was in serious danger. They rushed me into Fort Deshmel in the nick of time, where the little miss here gave me a high-grade tonic that served as first aid. And that tonic was an ideal quality high-grade one, with an effect that was about the same as a supreme tonic. It was capable of restoring lost limbs.

Still, it wasn’t quite as potent as a supreme tonic, so some pain remained. And the girl just removed that pain with her healing magic.

Tonics and healing magic were both extremely precious. An alchemical apothecary capable of brewing the former would surely be taken to be a state alchemist, while a magician capable of the

latter would be a court magician. And just the thought of an ideal quality high-grade tonic's price tag made me shudder. I was grateful to have survived, of course, but the price scared me.

"Ah, erm..." I muttered, a bit anxious.

"Oh, yes, could you sign here, please?" the girl handed me a piece of parchment.

I winced, and then checked the parchment. It said, "I consent to be a test subject for a high-grade tonic's (ideal quality) effects."

"Huh? Uh... Wh-What is this all about?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, it's just that high-grade tonics are expensive, so I can't give it away for free," she said. "So if you could consent to helping me research the effects of my medicine, I should be able to make it free of charge."

"What?"

"Oh, I'm not doing this entirely out of the kindness of my heart here!" the girl said in an animated fashion. "There's a lot I don't know about the effects of ideal quality high-grade tonics, and there aren't many people who get injured badly enough to necessitate such a potent tonic! So I'll write down your experiences in a report I'll submit to the alchemical apothecary society. If you are willing to cooperate with that, I'll make the tonic free of charge!"

She was so excitable I lost track of what she was saying halfway through. But put simply, so long as I agreed to be a test subject, she'd let me get away without having to pay for the tonic. That almost felt too good to be true.

"B-But..."

"Oh, he's up?" I heard a familiar voice.

"Huh? Y-You!" I exclaimed.

The man who walked into the infirmary was someone I recognized—he was the man who led the De Marl platoon during the war with Edesa Kura. I heard he had lost an arm, but the man had both of his hands, and it almost sounded like he recognized me.

"My daughter sure is talented, eh, Garfel?" he asked me.

"Y-You remember my name..." I sputtered.

"Of course I do!" he said with a smile. "It was, what, seventeen...or eighteen years ago? Back when I was still in active service."

"R-Right!"

I was shocked. De Marl's Blue Demon Wolf recognized my name and face, even though we only fought together a few times

nearly two decades ago. And that war hero now stood, his supposedly missing arm wrapped around the Holy Woman's shoulder, boasting of how she was his little girl.

"...The Holy Woman is your...?" I muttered in disbelief.

"Yeah, that's what they call her. But to me, she's just my little girl," he said with a father's proud smile.

"I see... Well, she saved my life. You've got a wonderful daughter. Thank you."

The two of them exchanged a glance and smiled at my compliment. It was a truly dazzling sight, and when they left, my two friends started discussing how good it would be to settle down and start a family.

Maybe worshipping the Holy Woman is a good idea. Not like I worship any gods, anyway. But a pretty, kind girl like this Holy Woman? That, I can get behind.



A year later, the black mass covering the sky just disappeared one day. I later found out that the Holy Woman and a powerful Mythical worked together to erase it. Me and my two buddies were still mercenaries, but we started relationships with three of the women working in Deshmel. We discussed if it was possible for us to become permanent guards at the fort.

Spurring each other on, we got to our feet.

"Three more days to Deshmel!" Otto said.

"Don't think they'll tell us to get out this time," Rigal said, remembering how they kicked us out last time. "The crisis is over."

"Well, the Holy Woman saved my life. I'll have to pay her back for that somehow!" I exclaimed.

All over the world, there were people just like us headed for Deshmel. Gathering there to see the legend of the new Holy Woman from up close. It was time to return home from our forced evacuation, and this would be our second chance at a better life. Truly our Holy Woman was one of a kind.

♣Afterword

HELLO, everyone. Kiri Komori here. Thank you very much for picking up volume 5 of *Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind*!

I would like to take this chance to thank everyone who read and supported this series. To the editors who reached out to me; to Yamigo for their beautiful illustrations; to Roman Lempert, who handled the translation; to everyone involved with the production of the eBook version; and to the family who always supported me—thank you all so much!

I added “Me at Age Sixteen – Part 1” and a bonus side chapter to this volume—neither existed in the original web novel.

We’ve finally reached the point where the final big battle was resolved and all the old grudges were settled. Thank you for sticking with me up to this point!

This volume initially included the web novel’s final chapter, but I decided to completely rewrite it and continue the series in a sixth volume! So please come back to see what is in store for Tina and the gang next!

Actually, writing the scene of the calamity consuming Edesa Kura was difficult for me, and I had to take a break from writing for a time. My house is in the Tōhoku region of Japan, in the area that was affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11th, 2011. Thankfully, I was living in Tokyo at the time, and my family got through the disaster safely.

But I had to ask myself: How many lives were lost to this natural disaster? How many hearts were scarred by it? Would this scene stir memories of that in people? Of all the series I’ve written so far, *Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind* is the one that deals the most with loss and the passing of others, with many characters passing away. It’s a story where the characters live through ephemeral times, carrying the sorrow and grief of that loss with them.

If there’s one thing I want people to take away from this series, it’s to cherish your life and those you hold dear. As fraught with

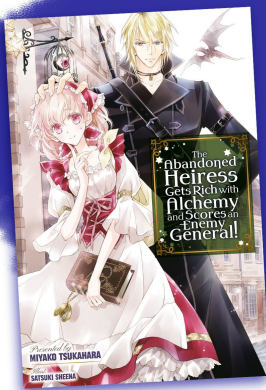
sadness and pain as our lives may be, we should always try our hardest to live on and find joy in the small things...

Whoa, that ended up becoming heavy! I'll just sum it up by saying that I hope that this work will help enrich your life.

Volumes 1-3 have paperback, hardcover, and audiobook versions on sale now! Volume 4 will be getting a release in all three versions soon too. I hope you check out the audiobooks as well! Narrators Cassandra Lee Morris and Graham Halstead narrate every volume alongside several guest narrators for chapters with different POVs!

Now then, thank you once again for staying with this series for so long. I hope to meet you again in Volume 6!

Kiri Komori



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